THE BELL-RINGER

By

CLARA ENDICOTT SEARS

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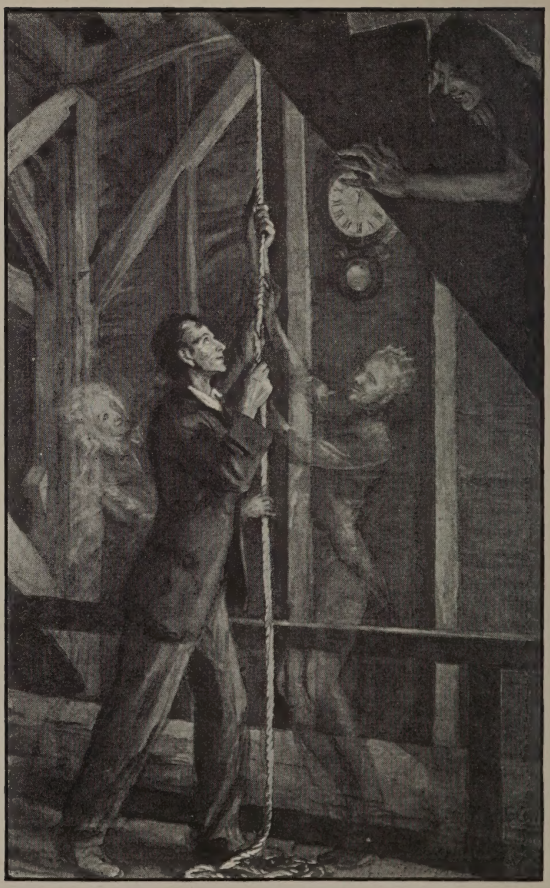
THE BELL-RINGER



Their Spirit Hands were giving the Rope an Added Power and Rhythm (page 280)

THE BELL-RINGER

An OLD-TIME VILLAGE TALE

BY

CLARA ENDICOTT SEARS

With Illustrations

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PREFACE

IT is through old traditions and old-time tales that we touch the spirit of a time and place. Valuable and necessary as are the statistics we accumulate, those dry facts have but little power to stir us. Like rows of fossils in a closed glass case we glance at them and then pass on unmoved.

But when some fragments of an old-time tale are rescued from oblivion, we find that life still stirs within them and has full power to quicken a responsive thrill. They give to us a magic key that opens wide the darkened portal leading to the Past, and while we read we walk beside the lives that once lived here, just as though it were the Present.

All these quaint traditions which we

happen on reveal the spiritual and mental history of their time, and so I think they all should be preserved. Very soon the rush of modern life will have swept away the potent characteristics of our old New England villages — already they are changing from the old into the new. The younger generations flit away to colleges and schools and come back citified and combed and curled, to take exception to the dear old ways, and in their place they put the latest innovations that turn the quiet, simple life into something far more complex, and all the peaceful charm inevitably disappears.

How often does one hear now the old-time appealing turn of phrase — the manner of speech associated with the country folk of old? Soon it will be a long-forgotten language — but how much we miss it and the old folks of whom it was a part!

I came upon the fragmentary outline of the following tale in an unexpected way. As author of *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*,

I received a letter from a stranger asking me to go to see her in a near-by town, as she had much that she could tell me.

Accordingly I went, and found myself ushered into the bedroom of an ancient lady who received me as a friend. "My dear," she said, "I knew them all — Bronson Alcott, Mrs. Alcott, and the girls. I played with Louisa Alcott as a child. They lived next door when the Fruitlands experiment was given up."

Many hours were passed in that room listening to her reminiscences — quaint amusing tales of childhood days, peaceful tales of village life, stirring tales of earlier times recounted to her by her father. And as she talked a veil of romance wrapped itself about her village home.

It was on one of these occasions that she said: "I think I'm going to die, so I will try and think up all I know. I can tell you of a romance and a mystery all in one — about the village bell."

It was then she gave a shadowy outline

which is the mainspring of the story of the "Bell-Ringer."

She could not tell me when it happened. "It was long before my day," she said, "and it was told me by an old neighbor who lived near, — while I was growing up, — and I can't remember it all. I never heard any one else speak of it, and I don't believe any one else knew. — Why! I have n't thought of it for years and years!"

Another time she said, "I remember well that in my youth it was said no bell ever had so sweet a tone — and, strange to say, it broke a second time and no one has been found to mend it!"

It was not long after that that her premonitions came true and she was called away to another world.

So truth and fiction perforce are interwoven in this village tale, but I like to think there's much more truth than fiction.

Wherever you look among the old tradi-

tions of the Nashua Valley there is nearly always uppermost the search for spiritual attainment and the reaching-out for some desired ideal. And so it was with Seth, the village bell-ringer, — a transcendentalist, though he did not know the word.

Clara Endicott Sears

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THE BELL-RINGER

CHAPTER I

EVENING MEETING

Those evening bells! those evening bells!
How many a tale their music tells!

IT is at the close of a Sabbath day, at sundown, when the air is still, that one should listen for the bells. Their voices can be heard ringing across the intervale from one hill-town to another — calling and answering all along the whole valley of the Nashua. As a rule Lancaster starts first, and a deep tone from the belfry of the old Bulfinch steeple reverberates in the hush of the magic hour.

There comes a momentary pause — then the faint, far-away sound of the bells of Fitchburg, and the bells of Leominster,

of Lunenburg and Shirley can be heard ringing a chain of silver notes into the mellow afterglow, and out from the steeples of Still River, Harvard, and the towns along the eastern ridges pour the answers like a wave of crystal music — and back and forth, back and forth, peal the bells across the intervale at sundown.

Generations come and go and listen for their sweet-toned voices — but it is not every one who can hear them, and few there are that note the difference in their chiming, or stop to ponder upon their mystic language; for they are human hands that toll the bells, and through these hands flows blood from human hearts, and who can tell the mysteries hidden therein?

Old Isaac Farrington, passing along the road over the hill, stopped his horse, and listened.

"I come around this way o' purpose," he explained to his neighbor John Miles, who was driving two cows home from pas-

ture, "'cause I thought maybe I'd hear 'em — the air's so still."

"Sure enough, sure enough!" he exclaimed after a pause, "there's Shirley's bell — and there goes Leominster a-pealing! I ain't heard 'em like that this long while!"

The two old men, with necks outstretched and their hands spread back of the ears like sounding-boards, listened attentively.

After a while, Isaac Farrington broke the silence.

"I suppose, o' course, you'll be following one or the other o' the processions tomorrow. I'll follow Joel Whitcomb, but I calculate a considerable number will follow after Silas Wildes, and Seth Ware is a-going to toll the bell," he said.

"That so? Well, Seth'll do it fine, I have n't a doubt," replied John Miles; "tolling for two burials at one time's something out o' the common. It's more than Luther Skinner could ha' done, well

on in years as he is, and I am glad Seth Ware's took his place." The old man flicked the cows, which were grazing along the roadside, with the leafy end of a long maple sapling. "The old woman has two minds as to who we'll follow," he continued, — "I ain't particular, — either one'll suit me so long as she gets her mind made up for sure. — Well, good-night, neighbor, — it's time I got the cows in."

With this parting salutation he started down the road, his bent figure plodding laboriously after the cattle and soon disappeared in the gathering twilight.

Down in the village church the people were assembling for evening prayer meeting. The air was warm, and heavy with the autumn scent of goldenrod and tansy, and through the open windows came the drowsy song of the crickets.

An undercurrent of expectancy and suppressed excitement could be felt passing rapidly from pew to pew as the church

began to fill, while upon the surface the congregation held itself with a ceremonious solemnity in keeping with the announcement received in the village the day before of the decease of two of its oldest inhabitants. It was expected that Parson Goodwin would refer to the double loss to the community, and a full attendance was looked for. The new bell-ringer was still ringing the bell — the straining of the rope as he pulled and slackened broke into the stillness of the church like a rasping, wheezy cough, under cover of which whispered communications were interchanged concerning the all-absorbing topic.

When the ringing ceased suddenly, a hush came over the congregation, and Parson Goodwin's tall, spare figure rose from the depths of the pulpit, and motioning with his hands, invited those present to unite in prayer.

It was a generally accepted fact that Parson Goodwin's prayers exceeded in

length any that had been heard for some years back; indeed, not since old Parson Dixby, some fifteen years before, used to glory in his gift of stating all the causes for giving thanks which he had been able to collect during the week, beginning with the hay crop in the summer season, and ending with such familiar incidents as the recovery of Deacon Dane's old white horse.

But on this occasion the anticipation of what would surely be referred to sooner or later kept those present from evincing the customary restiveness, and an unusual stillness pervaded the church. After the singing of the hymn, which followed the reading of the Scriptures, came the moment they all had been waiting for. Parson Goodwin, standing in the pulpit, spoke thus: —

"It is with a deep emotion that I speak of the double loss that has come to us, my dear friends. Two of our oldest and most respected neighbors have passed away in

the fulness of years — one was taken only a few hours before the other. Every one in these parts knows of the close friendship that existed between them, starting from early youth and lasting to venerable age. Not a resident of this place but has participated, some more, some less, in the ups and downs that attended this friendship; for there were times, we must all admit, when the surface of the waters was mightily disturbed, especially when the season came round for harvesting the hay crop, and later, when the orchards were heavy with the juicy red-cheeked apples, and bartering and selling were the order of the day. At such times it was but natural that men of spirit should assert themselves, and it was pardonable if the competition caused some heated arguments, but all who are here to-day must remember the occasion when these two friends stood side by side ready to fight the man who had the temerity to suggest that there was no show of harmony between them.

My friends, these two aged brethren of our denomination were bound by ties of a real devotion. The act of grace has been accorded them in that they were allowed to depart this life together, and begin a new and broader one side by side. It was characteristic of our departed brother, Deacon Joel, that the very morning of his decease he anxiously inquired as to the likelihood of Deacon Silas's accompanying him to another world. Upon hearing that at latest accounts he was pretty low, he said, 'Tell Silas from me that though I never knew him to get round to being on time, yet this being something special maybe he'll make an extra effort so's we'll cross over in company same as we've crossed the pastures year in, year out.' Deacon Silas did not disappoint his old comrade, as you know, my dear friends, and though he was a little late he did not tarry here more than an hour after Deacon Joel.

"It has been decided by the bereaved relatives that these old friends should

have one funeral and be buried at the same time. I am requested to announce that Deacon Joel's funeral procession will start at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning from the Whitcomb farm east of the village, and Deacon Silas's will start at the same time from the Wildes farm, west. They will meet at the cross-roads and then come on together. It devolves upon our new sexton, Seth Ware, to toll the bell on this sombre and touching occasion."

A faint rustle passed through the church like a breath of wind, caused by an involuntary movement of satisfaction and anticipation of coming emotion on the part of the listeners in the pews. The vestry door had hardly closed on Parson Goodwin at the end of the closing hymn, when a spontaneous rush down the aisle and out onto the church steps took place, where the pent-up feelings of the congregation poured forth in a torrent of questions and answers.

"Whose funeral do you follow? Jared and I follow Deacon Joel 'cause his wife's brother visited our folks some summers ago, and seems as though we'd ought to remember it at a time like this."

"No, we're bent on lining up back of Deacon Silas. Father did considerable work for him helping pick apples off and on, and I guess he'd like as we should follow along back of him."

So the talk went, shot back and forth with the swiftness of a shuttle-cock, and no one noticed the tall, angular figure of Seth Ware as he quietly closed the church doors and walked hurriedly away.

His destination was not far distant, for upon reaching a small white house standing a little farther down the road, but within sight of the church, his pace slackened. There was a gate that opened onto a narrow path leading to the front door, and on either side was a row of garden flowers — sweet alyssum, verbena, balsams, and heliotrope, all growing together

in a tangle and giving out a delicate fragrance that seemed especially penetrating on this early September evening. His awkward hesitation in lifting the latch revealed an inherent shyness and reserve in the man as one accustomed to solitude; but his face redeemed all that could be termed ungainly in his body, and those who looked in it were wont to look again, and then to ponder over it.

The village people spoke of him as "odd and cranky-like," but that was because they could not understand him. It was the look of the dreamer that lurked behind the swarthiness and sunburn of the tiller of the soil that puzzled them.

Seth Ware's forbears had all been stalwart farmers. For six generations they had followed the plough and harvested their crops on their tract of land overlooking the Nashua Valley. There had not been a poet among them, yet surely there was a kind of poetry interwoven somehow with the toiler in the make-up of this tall,

sombre-faced man as he lifted the latch of the little gate, and walked up the path to the cottage door. His foot had not touched the rough stone step when a rather faint, thin voice, almost like that of a child, called out: "Come in Seth, — we heard you coming; and, oh, Seth, we listened to the bell, — we thought you rung it fine! — Mind you scrape your shoes on the mat. Aunt Lucinda had a house-cleaning this morning."

Seth complied clumsily to this command and then walked into the room at the left of a small hallway. At the window sat a little crouched figure in a low wheel-chair. The bent head with its light wavy hair could have been taken for a child's, but when it was lifted to greet Seth the sweet, appealing face of a woman, young in years, but marked with the pathos of suffering, was revealed to him. Much thought and meditation through hours of solitude had left their impress on the clear-cut features, imparting a gentle seriousness beyond her

years, but the sudden smile illumined her, and was so spontaneous and whimsical that the crippled form left no impression whatsoever; it was the pure curves of the oval face, the luminous eyes so trusting in expression, — so full of eagerness and comprehension, — that drew the attention and held it there unwaveringly. To Seth, Love Babbitt seemed apart from all the world. He felt that in some vague way the awkward shyness that hampered him so much, and rendered it so difficult for him to give his thoughts expression, increased his capacity to understand the sufferings that often racked her poor twisted limbs.

Love had sat at the window in her wheel-chair, day in, day out, since she was twelve years old, when her slender, delicate body had been nearly crushed to death by the heavy wheels of a passing dray that was loaded with stones for the foundation of the new schoolhouse. She was now past eight and twenty. The years had slipped by almost unawares.

She had watched from her window the first signs of each coming spring with its swelling buds and tinges of green, and she had seen a few months later all the splendor of the summer fade, and the fluttering leaves grow dry and shrivelled and blow aimlessly hither and thither in the autumn winds as they fell from the giant elm across the way. She had watched many a winsome bride step proudly up the steps of the village church in all the glory of her bridal trappings, — for the church was well in view from where she sat, and she could easily look up the village street, — and she had mingled her tears with the mourners as they brought their dead for burial. No one dreamed of the inner struggle that tore and wrenched her soul as she contrasted her life, bound in by limitations, with the gay freedom of the laughing girls and youths who passed in groups with baskets on their arms, all headed towards the blueberry patch that flourished in the pastures half a mile or so

away. The struggle was always fought out silently. Within the frail and broken body there glowed a strength and sweetness born of these hard hours that warded off all tendency to bitterness of spirit. Year in and year out those who crossed the threshold were greeted with that quick, responsive smile of welcome, and when any one had been there once they somehow went again — and still again.

So it had been with Seth. When Lemuel Babbitt died, leaving his little crippled daughter of eighteen to face her life alone, he had felt something so akin to a divine and infinite pity stir within him that he overcame his shyness sufficiently to put his head in at the parlor window one day in passing.

"Anything I can do to help I'd be real glad to do," he had ventured hesitatingly.

"There's nothing needed now I'm here with Aunt Lucinda, but thank you kindly, Seth Ware, just the same."

Overcome at his boldness he had re-

treated hastily, but he found himself haunted all day by the memory of the small, childlike figure — the white face saddened by the recent sorrow, the strange, far-seeing gaze that met his own courageously and unflinchingly as she answered him.

That was the beginning of Seth Ware's devotion. "However it is," he murmured to himself as he was ploughing his three-acre lot the next morning, "there's something in Love Babbitt's face as makes me think o' stars on a spring evening; and then again I get to thinking o' white roses, and lilies, and flowers as has to be planted so's a strong wind don't hit 'em. But, oh, Lord, to think she's crippled!" — the last sentence had sounded almost like a groan. Something in her face this evening recalled this first impression. As he sat down by the door and tucked his broad-brimmed farmer's hat under his chair, he coughed to hide his emotion.

"Seems as though all this pollen float-

ing in the air come autumn kind o' catches at one's throat," he said by way of explanation.

"Maybe it's the dust in the old belfry, Seth," said Love; and then she added: "Aunt Lucinda's been over to the Whitcomb farm to see if she could do aught to help prepare for to-morrow. She said the widow was bearing up real well for all she's so far on in years. It's kind o' sad, Seth, to have the old folks all passing on, one after the other. Deacon Joel was nigh on to eighty-eight and Deacon Silas was just six months younger. Do you feel all right about tolling the bell?"

Seth twitched his elbows nervously. "Well, you might not say as I feel all right," he replied. "I'll manage somehow, I guess. But it's kind o' strange about that bell. There's something kind o' loosens up in me when I get it to ringing. Seems as though I might learn to make it speak out things I can't speak out for myself. I know it sounds foolish-like," he stam-

mered as the blood flushed his face, "but I thought likely you might understand. I was thinking about it when I rang for evening meeting to-night. I'm no kind o' hand at talking, as you know, Love. My tongue don't seem to get the words I want. But maybe I might get the bell to say things for me. I've a heap o' things deep down inside as wants to speak out somehow."

"I know what you mean! Oh, I'm sure I know what you mean, Seth! It's a beautiful thought, and I have n't a doubt but what it can be done."

Love Babbitt's face glowed as she answered him. She, too, possessed something of the poet-nature, and that same craving for more expression. Long ago she had discovered that underneath the rough exterior and the lumbering, halting ways that made the village people call Seth odd and cranky, a human soul was beating its wings in an effort to break loose and expand. Sometimes as she talked with him she had a curious sensation as if a

prisoner were looking out at her from under the shaggy eyebrows, and she had pondered much over that mysterious "dweller within the body" which no eye can behold, yet of whom she could often feel so acutely conscious.

"There's lots think all you've got to do is to pull the rope and the bell will ring all right," he went on, "but that's not so. There are ways and ways. When I toll to-morrow I'd like as every one should think it solemn-like, and as though I was doing honor to the dead."

There was a little pause, and then Love said: "Seth, how comes it you have these thoughts so different from all the other folks I see? I sometimes wonder if it's because you live alone, and have a deal of time to think. Father used to say that when he'd ploughed a field alone he'd thought a year's thoughts by the time he'd finished. I guess it's the same with you."

Just as Love was finishing her sentence, Aunt Lucinda Tracy stood in the doorway

with a plate of doughnuts in her hand which she first placed on a chair, then spreading a white cloth on a rather lop-sided, mahogany table she put the plate in the middle of it, and turned with a look of satisfaction to inspect the room.

"I'm right glad you have n't tracked in any mud, Seth Ware," she said, nodding her head at him. "I had a regular clean-up this morning. Seems as though when a funeral comes I must needs have things spick and span. I get to thinking it may come my turn next, and I guess you won't find me giving the neighbors a chance to find a speck o' dust in my corners!"

Lucinda Tracy's face was puckered into a network of fine wrinkles as if it were a peanut. Her faded hair still had a little tinge of red about it, and she wore it pulled severely away from her face and twisted into a hard knot at the back of her head; and this surmounted a small, wiry body which vibrated with perpetual energy.

Aunt Lucinda, as the whole village called her, was, to say the least, a positive character; she said what she thought and stuck to it—very often to the confusion of those about her. Moreover, she accentuated the effect of her words by snapping them out very fast, and bobbing her head so emphatically that it left the slow-minded helpless and, so to speak, stranded. Seth always gazed at her in dumb amazement. But he knew by instinct, and Love had often told him, that underneath the brown-checked gingham dress, which Aunt Lucinda was wont to wear, there beat a real woman's heart, brimming over with goodness and with kindly feeling. She had given proof of this when Lemuel Babbitt had died.

That day when Minervy Wade, who lived half a mile farther down the road, ran in with a shawl over her head to tell the news of his death, Lucinda Tracy saw a vision in her mind's eye of a poor crippled child left desolate and alone; and she did

not waste any time deliberating, but quickly took her apron off and hung it on the hook behind the kitchen door, then smoothed her hair, and filled a saucer full of milk for her cat, and closing her front door behind her and locking it, she started at a brisk rate down the road for a good three miles until she reached the Lemuel Babbitt farm. Lemuel's sister Beulah met her at the door.

"What's to become o' the child?" Lucinda had said without starting any preliminaries.

"Land sakes, ain't you quick, Lucinda Tracy! Why, Lemuel's not buried yet and the will's not been read — like as not he forgot to make one; his memory warn't over good, and search high, search low, none's been found yet."

Lucinda gave a defiant sniff and pushed her way into the house and into the best parlor, which was open in consideration of the solemn event, and there sat poor little Love Babbitt on the black haircloth

sofa, her big eyes wide open with fear and despair and her young face white and piteous with the new experience of bereavement. At the sight of Lucinda Tracy, she bowed her head to hide the tears she could no longer hold back, and as she felt herself clasped by a pair of bony but very loving arms the poor little cripple sobbed out: —

"Oh, Aunt Lucinda, dear, what can I do? What can I do? I'm so helpless, and father's gone, and Aunt Beulah says maybe I'll have to be sent to the town farm."

It was three days after this that Lucinda hired a farm team to bring Love Babbitt to her home on the village street, and from that day to this, — and it was ten years or more ago, — the girl had watched the goings and the comings of the village from the front windows, seated in her wheel-chair.

Seth had been told the story many times, and he recalled it now as he watched Aunt Lucinda put the plate of doughnuts on the table.

"To-morrow'll be a grand and solemn day," she continued, "and there'll be a grand showing of village folks at the church, and like as not a considerable number from outside, and I guess most all will follow to the cemetery. Minervy Wade's going to take me along in her chaise. She says she guesses she'll take her brother James's horse as has the blind eye, so's he can't see more than one funeral at a time, looking out sideways, and I said to her, 'Maybe it 'll be safer so.' We'll follow along behind Deacon Joel, and not too far in front so's we can see what's to be seen. — Ain't you going to stop and take supper with us, Seth? A dish o' tea sets kind o' good when it starts to grow dampish after sundown."

Seth moved his feet with a sort of shuffling movement and glanced awkwardly at Love.

"We'd like it real well if you would," she said, seconding the invitation, while her white face grew suddenly warm with a

faint glow that made her look like some sweet flower growing in a shady nook, into which a sunbeam had suddenly penetrated. The sight of it struck sharply at Seth's heart.

"I don't know but I might take a swallow or two," he said, and moved his chair up to the table.

And then for him came one of those hours that store themselves away in the memory in the deep places where Life's treasures are kept. The quaint, low-ceilinged room, the light from the lamp bringing out the lustre of an old mahogany secretary that stood in the corner, and deepening the color of the red geraniums blossoming in pots by the window, the charm of friendly conversation and the mystery of that other feeling, — pity — tenderness — adoration, — he had no name for it, — he did not attempt to analyze it, — he simply knew that it made life sweet and beautiful in that hour, and in the depths of his honest heart something

quickened which he knew would never leave him. In the solitude of his life, unshared by wife or children, Seth Ware had grown peculiarly sensitive to impressions. His life had been led close to the heart of nature — the woods and the fields and the running brooks were his friends, and they gave him something that he could not find in his intercourse with people. The inconsistencies, the petty qualities of human nature, disconcerted and confused him. He became troubled and restless when in the atmosphere of insincerity or envy or criticism, and he was becoming more and more prone to shun the village gatherings, and to retreat within the confines of his lonely farm.

But here in this little cottage on the village street, cheerfulness and warmth and kindly hospitality were always to be found, and on this evening, as he sat looking into the sweet face of Love Babbitt, and listening to Aunt Lucinda's spicy comments on the village happenings, the

sense of comfort and enjoyment sank deep into his soul.

It was just as he was reluctantly leaning down to get his hat from under his chair preparatory to leaving, that Love said: —

"I'll be listening here at the front window, Seth, when you toll the bell. I know you'll toll it sombre-like and slow, but mind that the tone goes out clear and strong so's the folks'll hear it far and near. You'll do honor to Deacon Joel and Deacon Silas, Seth. They were good men and true, and there's many that'll mourn them."

"There are folks in this place as say you'll make a mess of it and not toll even," asserted Aunt Lucinda, taking the teacups off the table. "I've told 'em not to go and get sick a-worrying, as I guessed you'd come out all right with it. Seems as though some folks were set on looking for trouble and they feel kind o' disappointed when it don't come. Mi-

nervy Wade's one o' them kind. She does just love a good heap o' trouble, and all the neighbors coming in to talk it over and every one of 'em sobbing and taking on. I reckon Minervy'll have a pocketful of handkerchiefs to-morrow so's no one'll get the better of her when it comes to mourning the departed. She sets great store by a good flow o' tears."

Seth listened, but he was looking at Love and thinking that her pale golden hair as it framed her face looked strangely like an aureole. He remembered as a child having been taken to a neighboring town along about Christmas-time and in a shop window he had seen a picture of an angel. He had asked what the light was that shone around the head and was told by his mother that it was a sign to show that the angel belonged in heaven. It made a deep impression on his imagination and the light shining on Love Babbitt's hair brought it vividly back to his mind.

"I reckon it'll help a lot, Love, if you

listen to me toll the bell," he said, the blood suffusing his face as he spoke. "Maybe you would tell me afterwards if there's aught amiss. I hope," he added suddenly, "you ain't been suffering overmuch to-day?"

As she turned her face towards him an expression of pain had swept across it like a shadow. It had gone as quickly as it had come, but it had not escaped him.

There was something that sounded like a break in his voice as he spoke, and he hastily coughed to hide it, adding: "I guess there's lots of folks as would do 'most anything to save you from feeling bad; — and there's not many as would keep up so brave and strong. I reckon your road's a kind o' rough one to travel on, Love, for all you're so cheery!"

For one moment the answering look glowed with radiant gratitude through which flashed something that startled and troubled Aunt Lucinda's honest heart, and set her to fluttering about the room

much as a hen would do who sensed an approaching danger to her one chicken.

"Was that joy or pain — or what was it that I saw?" she asked herself distractedly.

But Love's eyelids lowered. "Maybe heaven'll seem extra fine to me when I get there, 'cause it's not been so easy here," she replied very softly. "Good-night, Seth."

"Good-night, Love."

They listened to the crunching of his feet on the gravel as he walked down the path and on towards his home in the starlight.

Late that night Aunt Lucinda on her knees beside her bed prayed with fervent supplication: —

"O dear Lord, keep my poor crippled girl's heart free! — Don't ask her to suffer any more! — She's a poor cripple and not fit for any man; but her heart's like any other woman's — and it could break just as easy, dear Lord!"

CHAPTER II

THE FUNERAL OF DEACON JOEL AND DEACON SILAS

THE church doors had been thrown open and the choir had taken their seats in the organ loft. Hidden behind the pulpit sat Parson Goodwin, his hymn-book open upon his knee.

Three aged church-members sat motionless in their pews.

The stillness was unbroken except for the crowing of some irresponsible roosters down in Widow Haskell's henyard, and the barking of a dog in a near-by orchard.

The little village basked in the sunshine and waited.

Love Babbitt, stationed at the parlor window of the little cottage, waited also: her eyes were turned up the road which led over the hill. It was there that the

procession would come in sight, and at the first glimpse of it Seth would begin to toll. She found herself holding her breath to keep down her gathering excitement. Minervy Wade had called in the chaise for Aunt Lucinda, and there had been some confusion in getting off. The horse with the blind eye had not behaved as well as Minervy had expected and she had arrived at the door considerably flustered. If there was anything on earth that had the power to disconcert Aunt Lucinda, it was a horse. She confessed reluctantly that the creature's habit of suddenly pricking up its ears caused sinking spells in the pit of her stomach. So when Minervy arrived with her bonnet somewhat askew, Aunt Lucinda's suspicions were aroused and she demanded an explanation.

"I guess the worst's over," said Minervy; "it took exception to something lying 'side the road that looked kind o' like a dead cat. 'T was on the side of its blind eye, too. It seems kind o' strange it seen it."

Aunt Lucinda scrutinized the horse with a look of doubt and misgiving upon her face.

"Truth is," she said, "I'm inclined to think it may be considerable safer to deal with man or beast that have kept all they started out with. When all's said and done, they're odd enough when they've got two eyes, let alone only having one!"

Love had begun to fear that they would back out of their plan to follow the procession, but the occasion was too important to miss, and she had watched them drive off in the direction of the Whitcomb farm. She was just thinking about them when a sudden thrill surged through her from head to foot — for the village church bell had struck a muffled note, and was beginning to toll.

At the point where the road on the hill could be seen, a black speck had appeared, closely followed by another, and as they approached, behind them came a long, heterogeneous mass of vehicles — every

sort and kind of available conveyance having been brought into use by the country folk from far and near.

Never had there been such a demonstration in the annals of the county, and Love Babbitt clasped her hands against her breast with emotion as she watched the long black line stretching in unbroken ranks as far as she could see on the winding road, and listened to Seth's tolling of the bell.

And now the procession had reached the village street. All that remained of Deacon Silas led the way in a brand-new hearse drawn by a pair of coal-black horses. It had been secured from one of the larger towns for the occasion, and Love's eyes grew big with wonder and admiration at the sight of the driver faultlessly arrayed in a long black coat and tall 'hat from which hung a long crape "weeper." Close behind came the remains of Deacon Joel. Love felt a little grieved that he was not in a new hearse, and that John

Harris, the driver, who owned it, had no "weeper" on his hat. She had never seen one before and she thought it very impressive, though she had an inner conviction that Aunt Lucinda and Minervy would resent it. But the arrival of the procession was a grand sight, just the same, and it seemed to her a pity that she should be the only one to see it, — for all the people in the village were following, — only the three old people in the church had remained to receive it.

And now the street was all confusion. Vehicles of all kinds were being hitched to trees, posts, and fences, and the occupants were getting out as fast as they could and were hurrying into the church. Love knew that the little edifice could not hold half of the people who had come to pay a last tribute to Deacon Joel and Deacon Silas, and she looked anxiously for Aunt Lucinda and Minervy in the crowd. Just as her anxiety was beginning to grow poignant she caught sight of them pushing their way

up the steps of the church with a determination and vigor that set her mind at rest as to the results.

"It is n't they as won't get seats," she said out loud. "I reckon they'll be up front next the widow!"

A long train of vehicles still stretched up the road. The church was full to the doors. Those left outside gathered in groups near the steps and exchanged comments and complaints that they could not get inside. Love could hear them from her window.

But suddenly the bell stopped tolling, and a hush fell upon the scene. The funeral service had begun.

It was evident that Parson Goodwin was making the most of his opportunity and his prayer prolonged itself into what seemed an inconceivable length of time to those on the steps. But when the hymn came, sung in the long-drawn-out, wailing manner that was prevalent in those early days, a thrill of emotion stirred among the

mourners. Something like a sob seemed to heave through those assembled in the church, and to pass through the open door and clutch at the throats of those outside. Handkerchiefs were brought out from the depths of pockets and pressed convulsively to the eyes. Before the third verse was well under way, the strange, unfettered sound of weeping rose and fell, and above all could be heard the thin voices of the village choir singing their mournful dirge.

And the wave that passed through the mourners swept Love off her balance too, as she watched the scene from her wheelchair, and she buried her face in her hands and wept as if her heart would break.

Now, half the people assembled on this occasion had scarcely known either Deacon Silas or Deacon Joel. They came partly from a genuine desire to pay tribute to the memory of these two respected old men; but also from an innate craving for emotional excitement. The close proxim-

ity of death with its gloomy trappings has a strange drawing power. A goodly number there would easily have foregone the festive emotions of a wedding feast or of a christening, but who, like Minervy Wade, would have deplored the loss of such an opportunity as this one for the indulgence of a full "flow o' tears."

The groups outside could not hear the eulogy which Parson Goodwin delivered and which was listened to with rapt attention by the more fortunate mourners in the church, but they seemed to divine instinctively the exact moment when the invitation was given to review the remains; and Love saw them file through the door while others filed out into the sunshine, and hurried to unhitch their horses and make ready for the procession to the cemetery.

Love afterwards said she could never forget the moment when the procession finally got started to lay the two old friends to rest. There was some confusion at first,

but when the two hearses at last led off, moving slowly abreast up the country road and the long string of vehicles followed after, old and young alike were overcome by the touching scene. Love leaned forward in her chair as best she could and listened. Then came the sound she was waiting for. A full, strong tone pealed from the church belfry, and then another and another — slow, solemn, and vibrating. The tolling bell rang out into the September sunshine, and reverberated for miles. It had no longer a muffled sound, for Seth Ware was telling the countryside that these two old friends had started for their resting-place, and the air quivered with the tolling. And Love sat with parted lips and eyes aglow.

"Oh, it's grand, it's grand!" she whispered, catching her breath as she did so. "He's giving a voice to the bell."

And she listened with a beating heart to the sound.

And Seth tolled the bell while the long

procession wended its way slowly up the hill, and disappeared at the turn of the road, — and as Love watched it, it seemed to her that she saw Deacon Silas and Deacon Joel going hand in hand to their long sleep under the trees in the old cemetery on the hill.

The roosters down in Widow Haskell's henyard were still crowing. The sunshine lay in brilliant patches on the village street, and a great stillness seemed to have settled down upon the almost empty houses.

Love heard the crunching of a footstep on the gravel, and Seth Ware came up the little path to the door. He seemed to move with greater ease than usual, and his head was thrown back as if he had cast off a weight from his shoulders. The sharp lines of his face were softened by an expression in which there lurked the wonder of a new-found joy. He did not wait to knock, but walked into the little sitting-room and sat down alongside the wheel-

chair. Love saw that he moved as if in a dream.

"I muffled the bell first," he said, — his eyes looking out upon a new vision and speaking as if he were continuing a conversation already started, — " 'cause it seemed fitting-like and to tell of the mourning of the hearts that loved Deacon Silas and Deacon Joel. I found when I pulled the rope to one side it sounded one way, and when I pulled it straight it sounded another, and likewise on the other side it gave a different sound, and so I tolled the bell like as though it could speak, — or so it seemed to me, — and I felt unburdened-like, and the bell said things I have no way of saying."

"Oh, Seth!" exclaimed Love in an awe-struck tone. "Oh, Seth! Oh, Seth, — it had a voice, — I heard it speaking!"

"And when the prayers were over and the singing done, and they were taken from the church," he went on, seemingly unconscious of the interruption, "I heard

you say, 'Toll it sombre-like and slow, but mind that the tone goes out clear and strong so's the folks'll hear it far and near.' — I felt a power in my arms that did n't half-belong to me, and a tingling feeling swept me. I felt as if a part o' me were floating out-like on the sound. 'T was a strange, uncommon feeling."

"I listened all the time, Seth," said Love; "I heard the change. I guess you've hit on something no one knows, for I never heard the bell like that before."

Seth leaned his elbow on his knee, and rested his chin on his hand. Neither spoke for several moments.

"If it had n't been for you, Love, I'd ha' never found this thing, — and I'd ha' never known the kind o' joy I feel when I think that maybe if you listen to the bell, you'll hear it say a heap o' things that only you can hear."

His voice shook as he said this, and he raised his eyes and looked at her. He looked at her sweet face, so pure in out-

line, — so flower-like, so trusting in expression, — and at the outline of her poor crushed limbs which the folds of the knitted shawl that covered them could not wholly hide. A great wave of deep compassion, of overwhelming tenderness, swept through him, and tore at his heart.

"Maybe I'm wrong to say as much," he continued, "but I hope you'll take it kindly — 'cause you always understand, Love. I've never known you to fail, and I reckon you read my heart aright."

"I reckon so, too, Seth." There was a catch in Love's voice as she answered him — and it was very low. "I reckon you're my dear good friend that I'll always trust. I reckon I know what others don't know — and that is that there are thoughts inside your head worth a deal sight more than any's got around here, — and I know you're a good man, Seth, — and your heart's good, — and I know you're full o' sorrow for me, Seth, 'cause I'm crippled, and not like other girls."

The voice had dropped to a whisper, but the delicate head with its halo of pale gold hair was held high like a soldier's under fire. Before he could say anything, she added quickly — her breath coming faster than she could wholly control: "I ain't one to complain. It seems my path's laid out for me, and I must follow it, — there's nothing else to do. But, oh, Seth, you must help me follow it." In an agony of entreaty she suddenly stretched her clasped hands out to him.

"Help me to be brave! Help me to be right-minded and not to hate all the folks I see go by the window 'cause they can walk and I am tied-like to this chair. I'd be real glad if I could know I'd never grow sour 'cause I'm not like them. I guess I never will if only I can listen to your bell, Seth. I'll never forget this day, — no, never, — and every time you ring I'll be here listening."

Seth was very pale when she finished speaking. Then he leaned down and took

the little slim, delicate hands between his own rough ones, and held them gently as though he feared to hurt them.

"Like as not when folks hear the bell," he said, "they 'll say it's ringing for a wedding or a christening, — or mayhap it would be tolling for a funeral, — or on Sabbath Day 't would be ringing for meeting, but that won't be so Love, — I'll ring it just for you, — and don't you ever forget it, but you just say: 'There's Seth ringing the bell, and it's all for me, and for me only — in all the whole wide world.' You just say that to yourself, Love, while you sit here. And it won't ever change — it'll be so for always."

Then Seth picked up his hat and left the house.

He had walked but a short distance when the sound of clattering hoofs struck the stillness of the village, and to Love's amazement and terror she beheld the chaise with the white horse on the full gallop dash past the window. Aunt Lu-

cinda held the reins, her arms stretched at full length, her bonnet on the back of her head, — her face all flushed with the unusual exertion, — while Minervy sat in a collapsed heap by her side, her face buried in a handkerchief. Seth had looked round at the noise, and he sprang to the centre of the road.

"Get out o' the way, Seth Ware! You get out o' the way!" screamed Aunt Lucinda in a piercing voice; "for the land's sake, don't go standing like a dummy in front o' this horse to get run down!"

It seemed as if all the dogs in the neighborhood had been lying in wait for just such an occurrence as this, and they welcomed it exultantly, dashing out from unsuspected corners and running with leaps and bounds after the chaise, making a fearful din yelping and barking. Clouds of dust were raised by the clattering hoofs and whirling wheels, which turned the quiet village into a centre of noise and disorder. In spite of Aunt Lucinda's warn-

ing, Seth made a dive at the horse as it sped by, but missed it. He shouted to them to keep in the centre of the road, but the chaise, rocking and lurching from side to side, wheeled by so quickly that his advice was unavailing and he started after it on the full run. Widow Haskell's hired man joined him, and farther down the road Nathan Goodhue ran out from his barn with a pitchfork, and all three followed in hot pursuit. They could see Aunt Lucinda's head over the top of the chaise, her bonnet bobbing in the wind, and presently they saw Minervy's appear and disappear at intervals, and dark objects began to fly out from the vehicle like sparks from a wheel. As they came up to them they divined that Minervy was throwing out ballast after the manner of sailors at sea in a sinking ship. The lunch-basket with some sections of pie lay in the road; then two pair of goloshes; a little farther on was an umbrella, a pair of spectacles, and a drinking-cup.

"If she holds on," gasped Nathan Goodhue, his short legs carrying his round body with difficulty at such a pace, "I guess Lucinda Tracy'll win. Looks to me as if the old mare was making for home."

They ran as fast as they could so as to keep the runaway in sight.

"There goes her bonnet!" shouted Widow Haskell's hired man.

"Oh, Lord, I hope she don't jump after it!"

This ejaculation was drawn out by the sight of unmistakable preparations being made for drastic measures. Both women were standing up, and while Aunt Lucinda sawed away at the mare's mouth so vigorously that, in spite of her having the bit in her teeth, her head went first to one side and then the other, Minervy Wade showed signs of preparing to dive. Suddenly out shot something that looked like a round ball with two stiff pegs protruding from it. It was Minervy!

The three men shouted in alarm.

"Oh, Lord, there she goes!"

"She's down in the ditch!"

"No, she ain't, she's cleared it!"

"I don't see her!"

"She must be there!"

Breathlessly they ran, and Nathan Goodhue snatched up Aunt Lucinda's bonnet on his pitchfork when they reached it, and kept up with the others with a gait that threatened to shake him to pieces so heavily did his feet strike the ground. Aunt Lucinda and the chaise had disappeared. With trepidation they arrived at the spot where Minervy had landed, dreading what they might find. They saw her lying upon a mound of cornstalks motionless, her hand tightly clasping her bag.

"Minervy Wade, are you there?" shouted Widow Haskell's hired man in her ear.

"As far as I know, I am," said Minervy, opening one eye, "but I ain't as yet made an effort to find out."

"Pull her legs out and see if they are broke!" gasped Nathan Goodhue. This

suggestion acted on Minervy like a bolt from an electric battery.

"You stop that!" she cried in a threatening voice, hastily tucking her legs under her. "You dare pull my legs out, you impudent good-for-nothing, and I'll get yours put in the stocks! What, for the land's sake, have you got stuck up on your pitchfork?"

"I guess it's a bonnet," ventured Widow Haskell's hired man, "and I'm thinking it's Lucinda's."

At this a vivid recollection swept over Minervy and she set up a wail.

"Oh, Lucinda Tracy, suppose you're dead, whatever will I do? How long have I been here? Don't stop with me, but you men go find Lucinda, — quick, — and don't waste time."

Finding that Minervy was evidently not badly hurt, Seth Ware left the two others to minister to her needs, and he sped on in search of Aunt Lucinda. In his heart he heard, as it were, a cry from Love

Babbitt that spurred him on to greater effort, and his long legs carried him over the ground as though he had wings at his heels.

"Poor little Love," he said to himself as he ran, — "poor little Love waiting at her window and unable to move."

The pathos of that waiting figure! The thought of it gripped at his heart. He looked down the road and there was no chaise in sight. What could have been the fate of Aunt Lucinda and the old white mare?

Presently he came in sight of the Wade homestead. The barn door was open, and it seemed to Seth that he caught sight of the back of a chaise.

"Aunt Lucinda!" he called in a ringing voice.

There was no answer. As he ran up to the open door, Aunt Lucinda's head protruded itself around the side of the dusty, dilapidated vehicle. She put her finger to her lips and shook her head at him.

"Aunt Lucinda, are you hurt?" Seth called eagerly.

Again she shook her head at him and placed her finger on her lips. As he came in at the door, mystified by her unusual behavior, she blurted out the explanation — "*Too stark mad to speak!*" she said in a choking voice. "You stop right where you are, Seth Ware!"

Seth paused in astonishment, and then with some curiosity went up and looked at her. Never did a small figure present such a bristling front as Aunt Lucinda Tracy's did. He was quite startled at the sight.

"Why, Aunt Lucinda," he said, "you look mad just clear through!"

"Well, I just guess I am!" she retorted fiercely. "I feel as though I could snap like a turtle, and I ain't sure I can't. To think of two women being made a spectacle of this way, coming from a funeral, and all along of the ugly nature of a pesky old nag like this one. I'm more than cer-

tain she's no more blind of one eye than you are. It all come because of Minervy's 'flow o' tears.' I'll never, as long as I live, go to another funeral with Minervy Wade. It was shocking the way she took on, — sobbing out loud when they sung the hymn, — and you could ha' heard her from one end of the church to the other when she viewed the remains. She took on considerably more than Widow Whitcomb, who had a right to mourn as loud as she chose, poor woman. I'm just all put out with Minervy!"

"So the old mare run home," said Seth, examining the chaise to see if it was injured.

"That's just about what happened," assented Aunt Lucinda. "We 'most upset turning the corner, but I hung on for dear life, and before I knew it she was chewing hay in here as unconcerned as though there'd been no runaway at all. What's become of Minervy?"

"I left her lying on a mound o' corn-

stalks," answered Seth. "I guess we'd better go find her, — and then there's Love to think of." He looked entreatingly at Aunt Lucinda as he said this.

"My land!" she exclaimed, clapping her two hands together; "she must ha' seen us pass the house, and like as not the poor girl's in a peck o' trouble to know what's happened, and she sitting there by herself with no one to tell her! She must ha' known things were pretty bad when she seen me holding onto the reins! Truth is, Minervy got to going so with her sobbings and her wailings that it shook up the old mare considerable, and it's my opinion she kind o' resented it, same as I did. I could n't say now what started her, but it looks to me as though she got a notion she'd had about all she wanted, for all of a sudden we were going lickerty split down the road, and I said to myself this warn't the time to take chances, so I jerked the reins out o' Minervy's hands. I have n't a doubt but what we cut a queer figure!"

It was with some difficulty that Seth smoothed Aunt Lucinda's ruffled feathers sufficiently to get her out of the barn and into a farm-wagon which happened along just then, going in the direction of the village. The driver gazed with some curiosity at the small, rumpled figure that got in behind him and who glared back at him so defiantly.

"Looks kind o' like as though you'd been in a high wind," he ventured tentatively.

"Now, don't you start being impudent!" retorted Aunt Lucinda; "you look to your horse and see where you're going. I've no notion of getting into any more high winds to-day if I can help it."

They jogged along at what seemed to them an exasperating pace in view of the fact that both were anxious about Minervy, and more so about Love. When finally they arrived at the spot where Minervy had jumped, they found her sitting upon the stone wall that bordered the road; her face was buried in her hand-

kerchief and she seemed wholly given over to venting her feelings with heart-rending sobs. Near by stood Widow Haskell's hired man, a blank expression upon his face, and by him was Nathan Goodhue with Aunt Lucinda's bonnet still aloft on the end of his pitchfork. The farm-wagon halted and all gazed in silence and amazement at Minervy.

"Is her leg broke?" called out Aunt Lucinda.

Without uncovering her face Minervy pointed an accusing finger at Nathan Goodhue.

"That beast was making to pull it to see," she sobbed out.

"Land sakes alive!" ejaculated Aunt Lucinda, looking at him. It was then she saw her bonnet. Standing up in the wagon she stamped her foot commandingly. "Take that bonnet down off that pitch-fork — it looks like a head!" she cried. "My sorrows, have n't we had enough for one day without a stupid loon like you

parading the highway with my bonnet hanging like a scalp from an Indian tomahawk? I'd like to know what my Grandfather Tracy would ha' said if he'd seen the spectacle one of his folks has been made of this day!"

Seth quickly took the bonnet and put it on Aunt Lucinda's head.

"Anyway, what's wrong with Minervy?" she asked.

"I never yet saw the beat," said Widow Haskell's hired man.

"How's that?" asked Seth.

"Well, it's this way," broke in Nathan Goodhue. "Minervy's comin' all right if we give her time. It turns out she used up eleven of her pocket handkerchiefs at the funeral — she's got 'em here in her bag, and she's set her mind on finishing up the dozen. She says she'd feel better so, and that it won't take her long now, — and I swan I guess it won't at this rate, — it certainly takes a woman to hitch up such a gol-darn notion as that!"

"I won't stand no more of it — I've stood too much already. Her tears can flow right along for all me. Seth Ware, you take me home!" exclaimed Aunt Lucinda, sinking back exhausted in the farm-wagon.

And Seth took Aunt Lucinda home. They found Love Babbitt with an ashen face waiting by the window in her wheel-chair.

And Aunt Lucinda's tired head rested on Love's shoulder; and Love's little hand patted and caressed her and soothed her as she would have soothed a child. And when Seth looked at the sweet face, so full of sympathy and tenderness, and saw in every curve and line the beauty and loveliness of her nature refined through years of suffering and self-effacement, he instinctively bowed his head and clasped his roughened, toil-stained hands together as though the very ground he stood upon was holy.

CHAPTER III

LUTHER SKINNER'S WARNING

IT was getting towards Christmas-time. Flurries of snow had whitened the fields and capped the mountains across the intervale. The birds had flown South. Only the intrepid ones had secreted themselves in the pine woods and came out on sunny days in search of food. The quarrelsome shriek of the blue jay could often be heard; the tapping of the woodpeckers; the occasional note of the phœbe-bird; the busy twitterings of the chickadees as they hopped from branch to branch on the leafless alder bushes where a few stray berries still remained ungathered. These evidences of that mysterious life, that goes on irrespective of the living or the dying, the joys or sorrows of the human lives that seemingly live close to it, were felt

acutely by Seth Ware. Between him and the creatures of the woods there seemed to be a bond of fellowship. His presence never frightened them nor did they shrink from his investigation of their haunts and habits. He could imitate the call of all the birds, and frequently they answered him as if they felt he understood their language; and the wild four-footed creatures were friendly and evinced no fear of him.

His house stood, old and gray, upon the outskirts of a pine grove, and between it and the road a cultivated patch of land kept off intruders. The egress and the exit were along a winding wood road at the back.

It had a sad, deserted look, this old gray house, and lonely for a solitary man to live in; but Seth was never lonely. To him the rooms were full of memories. The chair his mother sat in was still beside the hearth where she had left it, and her spinning-wheel still stood behind the door.

His father's coat and hat hung in the little closet by the stairs. For fifteen years his mother had kept them there, and after she had gone he had not touched them. He never thought of changing anything. The dust lay thick in all the unused rooms, — it sadly lacked a woman's hand to brush away the cobwebs and to let the sunshine in, — and yet, though Seth was nearing forty years, he never seemed to think of marriage. The ordinary woman frightened him and made him ill at ease. He shrank away from gossiping tongues, and the senseless chatter of his neighbors' wives troubled him, so when his work was done he cooked himself a frugal meal and lit his pipe and sat beside his lonely hearth and felt content, and had no thought to change it. Some books he read, and those he loved, but his range was not a broad one, and if he tried to bring a new one in among his favorites he had a guilty sense, as if in some way he was being false to those he cared for. Those he read were

old ones that had been upon the shelf away back in boyhood days. Time had shabbied them, and here and there a leaf turned down showed where those, now gone, had lingered and had marked a favorite page, and he would read it and re-read it with reverence and awe. The rush and turmoil of the world outside the narrow confines of his life made no impression on his consciousness. He earned a pittance from his farm — enough to feed and warm him and he did not seek for more. He knew the signs of sky and wind. He knew the habits of the trees and flowers. He listened for the honking of wild geese migrating southward, and his ear was first to catch the note of blue birds after the winter snows had melted. These things he loved, and this had been his life until the day Love Babbitt entered it; and even then no change occurred except he added her to all these things he loved, and made her part of morning, noon, and night, and worshipped her. The thought

had never come to him to read her heart. He knew her life hung by a slender stem, and like some flower of the woods too harsh a wind would break it. He had her always with him in his thoughts and knew that he could always find her sitting by her window looking out upon the church. In truth, he hardly looked upon her as a woman, but rather as some pure and chastened saint whose sufferings had cleansed her soul of all that bore a semblance to the earth-bound. And this was what he cherished in her. The poet and the dreamer in him hungered for the mystery of such a vision and it held his soul enraptured — he asked for nothing more.

There had been a great chill in the air for the last few days. The sky had taken on a leaden hue, and as Seth walked across his field to the road he noticed that snowflakes were falling.

Luther Skinner had sent him word that he had something on his mind to tell him,

and he planned to stop in and see him on his way to the village.

Luther lived in a small white house on the road beyond the church going down towards the river, and his widowed sister Hannah had kept house for him since his wife had died ten years before. She was a tall, spare woman with stooping shoulders over which she always wore an old black shawl. Under her heavy brows shone out a pair of small black eyes as sharp as gimlets that searched the nooks and corners of the neighborhood. Metaphorically speaking, Hannah Turner raked the village street from end to end every day in the week and gathered up the news much as the rag-pickers will root among the bits of hay, stray papers, old bottles, and tin cans that are heaped up in back yards. Seth hoped that she would be away indulging in her favorite pastime, but as he neared the house she was coming round the corner of it with a tin pail in her hand, having been to feed the hens. She

stood still and watched him as he came up to the door.

"Come to see Luther?" she said.

"Yes," replied Seth. "Luther sent word for me to come — said he had something to tell me, so I did n't wait, but come right along."

"Luther Skinner said he had something to tell you?" almost screamed Hannah, "and naught was said to me about it! I calculate I'll know what 't is if my name's Hannah Turner! He's been sick a-bed these last three days, but maybe he'll be sitting by the fire now for aught I know. You'd best come in and see."

Seth followed her into the house. Huddled in the chimney-corner was Luther's bent and aged form, his bony hands spread out before him like bats' wings, catching all the heat that came from some old pine logs that smouldered on the hearth. A red nightcap was perched upon his head, and at an angle that gave him an appearance of mock jauntiness quite terrible to

see, considering the gaunt, cadaverous face that peered from underneath it.

He gave a searching look at Seth as he entered, and seeing Hannah with him he turned upon her with a fierce annoyance.

"Now, Hannah Turner, I did n't ask you to come nosing round here when I want to talk private to Seth Ware. I know your ways. You get away from here, and don't you go to listening at doors or peeking through keyholes while I'm talking to him or you'll live to regret it."

Hannah sniffed defiantly, yet it was evident that he controlled her and that she was used to giving in to him, for to Seth's surprise she made no answer, but left the room and, as he thought, went out into the yard.

Luther signed to him to come up closer, which he did, and drawing up a stool he sat waiting quietly for the old man to speak.

"Seth Ware," he finally said, "it's you now that rings the bell in the old church yonder. I rung it winters and summers

for well-nigh fifteen years. I know each nook and cranny of that church. I know what others don't know, and I found a deal to ponder over. Now you've been ringing close on to three months. Tell me, Seth," — the old man lowered his voice and leaned far forward in his chair, — "has anything that seemed kind o' odd happened while you was ringing?"

Luther's manner was mysterious and Seth looked at him in surprise.

"Can you think of anything, Seth," he continued, leaning still farther forward, "when you felt as though things were n't as usual?"

"I don't know as I get your meaning," answered Seth. "Once or twice I've felt a tingling run from head to foot while I was ringing, if that's what you mean."

"Anything more? — anything more, Seth?"

"Well, since you ask me, I might as well allow that once the bell seemed to get away from me and ring louder than

I meant it should. I pondered considerably over it at the time, but I could n't seem to find a reason for it."

"When was that, Seth? — Here, you come nearer to me. I don't want as any one should hear," whispered Luther, his face twisted with an expression of excited curiosity. "When did you say that happened?"

Seth drew his chair closer. As he did so he thought he heard a faint creak in the hall, but he was not sure of it.

"I reckon it was along about a week ago come Sabbath evening," he replied.

"That was the thirteenth of the month?"

"Yes, maybe it was."

"I judged as much," said Luther. "They ain't missed that date often."

"Who's they?" asked Seth, beginning to listen attentively to the old man. "What are you driving at, Luther Skinner? What's on your mind?"

"Considerable," answered Luther, nervously twitching his cap at a still more jaunty angle. "But I want to ask an-

other question. Was your old dog there with you?"

"No, she warn't," said Seth. "I left her to look after the house."

"Well, if she had been there I figure out you'd ha' seen the hair bristle up on her back, and, like as not, she'd ha' growled and snarled. Mine used to."

Seth felt a little chill go down his spine.

"You thought that you was pulling the rope alone," whispered Luther, "but you warn't, Seth, — *there was two others a-helping you.* I've seen 'em with my own eyes. They come on the thirteenth o' this month, and then they come again the night before the new year — or thereabouts. First time I saw 'em as plain as plain. First, he come right through the open door, then she come; and they come close up to me as I was ringing for evening meeting after dark had set in, and all of a sudden the rope seemed to go by itself, and the bell rung so loud I thought it would snap its tongue off. I felt as if elec-

tric sparks was flying all over me, and you should have seen Molly! — why, she crouched alongside the wall and snapped and snarled, and all her hair stood up along her back and she set to trembling something awful. I allow I 'most fell dead with fright. But that was nothing to New Year's Eve. It had been kind o' drizzling all day and towards night it turned to snow, and when it come time to ring out the old year I took my lantern, and Molly she come along with me. As I unlocked the door o' the church, somehow I felt kind o' creepy-like. It was awful still there, and the lantern threw long shadows along the floor and on the walls. There warn't much wind, and yet it seemed to kind o' whistle through the belfry. — Well, I begun to ring, and Molly was squatting on her haunches near by when it seemed as though an icy-cold blast came through the door. Molly she leapt up and set to barking and showing her teeth, and then she slunk into the

corner and snapped and snarled and acted as though she was demented. I saw her eyes glaring at something and there was froth on her mouth. I turned to follow her gaze, and there I saw, just as clear as I see you, the figure of an old man coming through the door and with him was a little old lady with a lace cap on her head, and it seemed as though she had a black silk dress on, and it kind o' rustled as she moved, — though maybe that was my fancy, — and when he stepped over the threshold he turned to help her and she looked up at him and smiled and put her hand on his arm. And they come right towards me as I held the rope, and they kept a-nodding and a-smiling at each other just as though they were young folks, and I felt a chill go through me, and it seemed as though my heart stopped beating; and suddenly the bell begun to ring as loud, *as loud*, and I had no power to stop it! I'm inclined to think I must ha' grown dazed or something, 'cause I don't re-

member clearly what I did, but all of a sudden the bell stopped, and I come, as it were, to my senses, and looked and saw that the old gentleman was helping his little old lady out o' the door, and she was still kind o' nodding and smiling, and it suddenly come over me that they were growing fainter and that they were outside on the gravel path. I ran to the door to see where they'd go, and I saw them go across the grass to a certain spot behind the church where they stopped and suddenly disappeared.

"Now, this is gospel truth, Seth Ware. I seen 'em just as I'm telling you, and what's more, it's happened since, — and I know now where they come from. You go round back o' the church and you'll find up near the fence an old slate gravestone at the head o' two grassy mounds o' earth. The name has gone from it, though it was once there. Jonathan Barrows used to be bell-ringer before me, and he told me he'd once seen 'em; but he

said to me, 'Luther Skinner, mind you never breathe this to a living soul unless it's to the man who follows you. Keep this thing secret; — for the spirits do no harm if you let 'em alone, and it brings ill luck to peer into their ways or to molest them. Say naught of it to man or woman!' And I say the same to you, Seth Ware."

In Luther's voice there was a note of solemn warning. As he finished speaking, Seth looked quickly round the room and his eyes caught sight of a black object huddled behind the door which led out into the little hallway.

In all his ways Seth was direct and outspoken, and, though for a moment he paused in dismay, he spoke the truth right out without prevarication.

"There's a woman back o' that door eavesdropping, and it's none other than Hannah Turner!"

Luther's face turned pale as he moved with difficulty to look in the direction of the door.

"Hannah Turner," said he, slowly and distinctly emphasizing each word, "you 've gone and done something you'll be regretting for the rest of your mortal life. 'T is an awful deed to pry into the secrets o' the dead. What I 've told Seth warn't for you to hear — you know it as well as I. 'T was a sacred trust I put in his keeping — just as Jonathan Barrows put it in mine. Now, mind what I'm telling you. If you let your tongue go to wagging about what you've heard this day, a curse will fall upon this house as sure as my name's Luther Skinner; for to anger the spirits of them that's dead and gone is a terrible thing to do, and woe to you for having done what you ha' done! *I say, woe to you!* "

There was a pause. Then Hannah crept out from her hiding-place, her face distorted by a look of fear and anger. Coming close to Seth, she breathed her venom up into his face.

"I ain't one that forgets easy, Seth

Ware," she said. "It's all along of you that Luther's said woe to me, and I'll make you pay for it." She glanced about her uneasily, and then in a hoarse whisper she added: "I tell you I'll make you pay for it!" Then she put her shawl over her head and went quickly out of the front door.

As it slammed to, a draught of cold air blew into the room, and Seth involuntarily moved up nearer the fire. Luther's hands were twitching nervously and a look of anxiety was on his face.

"If she tells aught of what she's heard it'll go ill with us," he said; "but I'm thinking Hannah would have a fear herself. I've kept the secret as Jonathan bade me. I meant none but you should ever know it."

"If a curse goes with the telling, it ain't likely she'd speak of it," replied Seth, "though it's hard to tell what women-folks'll do."

Thus saying he turned up his coat-

collar and reached for his hat. The whole interview had disturbed and troubled him, and the very sight of the old man, with his piercing eyes and his red nightcap, became suddenly distasteful to him. He turned and walked towards the door.

"Well, I'll be going now, I guess," he said, looking back. "I ain't so certain I'm glad you've told me what you have, but maybe it's best so."

"You say right," replied Luther, nodding his head, "it's best so — mark my words. To be sure I can't tell as you'd be one to see 'em. Some say there are those as can see spirits and then again there are those that can't. And you might see 'em once in a lifetime and never again — there's no telling. But you know now what it's meant you should know. Jonathan Barrows seen 'em often and so did I. He passed the secret on to me, being bell-ringer, and now I've passed it on to you and I say now as I said before — it's best so."

When Seth got out of the house he took a deep breath of air into his lungs and walked quickly up the road, trying as he did so to shake off the impression of what he had heard. His mind had never dwelt upon such things, and he had supposed they had no power to trouble him, but he realized that he was not so sure of it now.

Somehow it was a relief when he saw Minervy Wade's short and comfortable figure approaching him in evident hurry and fluster. As a rule he would have passed her quickly with a short grunt as a salutation, but on this occasion he found himself pausing in the road and saying, "Good-day, Minervy."

"Good-day, Seth Ware," she answered; adding quickly, "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"Why, my niece Jennie Wade's coming here to be married! I got the letter yesterday." Minervy caught her breath excitedly. "She said I was to notify Par-

son Goodwin and I've just been up to his house. Mrs. 'Liza Bentley's going to make her wedding gown. She says she can make it in a week's time 'cause Phœbe Rand'll be free to help her. Jennie comes to stay with me and I'm to look for her in a day or two. Her young man, Elisha Green, is going to stay over to Widow Haskell's. I guess I'm going to have considerable to attend to first and last."

Minervy paused to take another breath. "I passed by Lucinda's on my way up to Parson Goodwin's," she added, a sudden thought striking her, "and I seen Love Babbitt in the window with a blue ribbon bow stuck on the front of her waist as perky as you please! I never seen her wear such a thing before — she a cripple and all!"

Seth shrank from Minervy's tone. He could not bear to hear Love spoken of as a creature apart from her kind, and the unconscious cruelty of the remark made it doubly poignant to him, for he knew

that Minervy thought herself a true friend to Love and what she had said merely revealed a generally accepted sentiment.

"I'm real glad to hear it," he remarked shortly. "Women-folks set great store by such things I've heard tell."

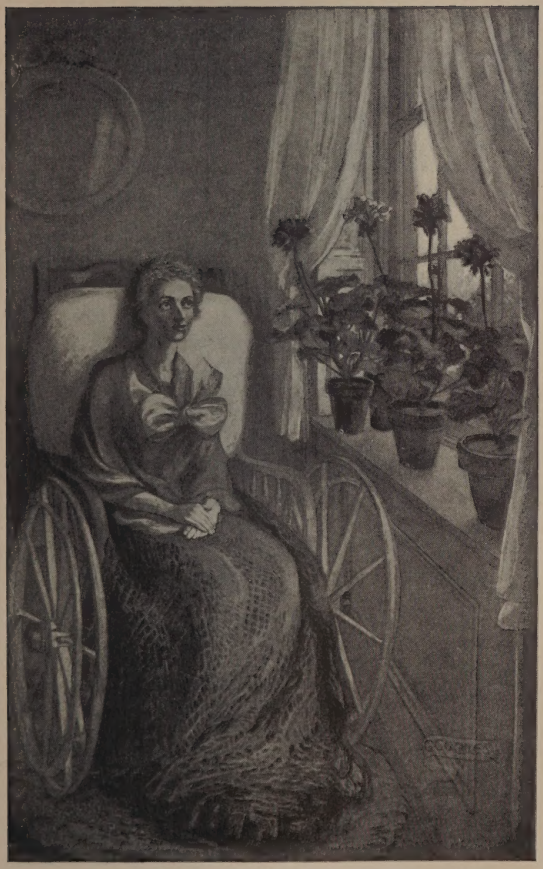
The tone of his voice was not lost on Minervy. She gave a quick glance up at his face and then turned to move on.

"Well, I'll bid you good-bye," she said, and started off without further comment; but several times as she went down the road she shook her head and murmured, "Mercy sakes alive!"

As Seth proceeded on his way it puzzled him that Minervy's mention of the ribbon bow seemed to come back to him continually. He was perfectly ignorant of the variations of feminine attire; in fact, he had never thought to notice what it was like or whether it was pleasing. His secluded life had stunted the growth of such perceptions, and as a rule a woman was an object of dread to him, and personal

adornment he had supposed belonged exclusively to the worthless and the worldly of the sex. But somehow this sudden mention of a ribbon bow adorning the waist of Love Babbitt conveyed to his mind a new idea of joyousness, — something affiliated with youth and sunshine; and though he had not intended to go by the house that day, as he had business elsewhere, he found himself headed in that direction. He walked slowly as he approached the little white cottage, and a feeling that was almost like fear crept over him as he stood so as not to be seen and peered in at the window.

There sat Love in her wheel-chair, her sweet face radiant with a smile of pleasure, her wavy hair reflecting the light like the pale glimmer of a sunbeam on a winter's day, and, lo and behold! a large crisp ribbon bow, the color of the azure skies, perched proudly on her slender, childlike bosom, much as a butterfly would light upon the petal of a flower.



A Large Crisp Bow perched proudly on her Slender Childlike Bosom

Seth's feet seemed to become rooted to the spot as he gazed in wonder and amazement. Somehow it seemed to remove her from him in some strange way, and to suggest an attitude of mind of which he was wholly ignorant. He had not expected it would look quite as it did to him, for Love had always been dressed in the nondescript garments of a helpless invalid, devoid of all attempt to please the eye, — and yet how pretty it was, with its saucy ends standing out like wings! But when he glanced from the bow to the delicate white face above it, so plainly stamped by suffering, the contrast smote his heart, and now he saw more plainly than before how slender was the thread that held her down to earth.

He started as he heard the front door open. Aunt Lucinda put a platter of crumbs out on the steps to tempt the birds, and as she did so she caught sight of Seth. She made a sign to him to go around to the kitchen door, which he did,

walking on tiptoe so as to make no noise. Aunt Lucinda was waiting there, her face puckered into an expression in which lurked astonishment and fear.

"Have you seen it?" she asked in a whisper without any preliminaries.

"Do you mean the ribbon bow?"

"What else could I mean, for goodness sakes, Seth Ware, when I've thought of nothing else all day? I can't think what's come over her all of a sudden to want that perky thing sitting up on her chest, — she crippled for years, and no thought given to ribbons and gew-gaws and things that girls pin onto themselves when they 've a mind to catch attention!"

Aunt Lucinda's little bony fingers clasped and unclasped each other nervously, while Seth looked at her, a blank expression on his face.

"It was this way," she went on; "I was fixing up the sitting-room around about eight o'clock this morning when Love said to me all of a sudden, 'Aunt Lucinda, you

hurry up so you can go to the store early. I've a mind to get me a fine ribbon bow to wear. I want it blue like forget-me-nots, and I'll put a bit of wire on the ends to make them stand up bravely.' 'For mercy sakes, Love Babbitt,' said I, 'whatever do you want a ribbon bow for? You who sit in a chair all day with a shawl over your knees had n't ought to want any silly finery like that! Are you gone crazy?' I noticed a queer look come over her face when I said about her sitting in a chair all day, and I felt kind o' sorry I said it, but she answered, 'I've a mind to wear a ribbon bow to-day, Aunt Lucinda,' and that's all she said; and I said to myself, 'Poor girl, if she wants to there's no harm in it'; but what the neighbors 'll think of it is more than I can guess; and when I went to the store I bought the ribbon and a bit of wire and gave 'em to her. First thing I knew she'd fixed it up and stuck it in her dress, and then she called me, with a kind of laugh and a kind of sob in her voice.

'Look at me, Aunt Lucinda,' she said, her eyes all lighted up, — 'don't I look fine? Don't I look kind o' like other girls now, so somebody might make-believe I was like them?'

"I was all knocked up, and did n't know what to say without making her feel bad, — the poor girl looked at me so appealing-like, — and when I come to look at her face it did look so sweet and pretty it made my heart ache, and I just spoke out without thinking, and I said, 'Sakes alive, you look like a picture, Love,' — and she laughed, and the pink come into her cheeks and she's been that way all day. Every one that's passed the house has taken notice of it. I'm blessed if I know what Parson Goodwin'll say. He's always reminding her that her time may be short, seeing as she's crippled, — and tells her to keep it in mind. He might take offence at the bow as being unseemly on her — there's no telling."

Seth shrank from this constant refer-

ence to poor little Love's bodily infirmity.

"I'm not one as has any knowledge of such things," he said helplessly, — "I have no notion of the ways of women-folks, but whether the minister or the neighbors or all the folks in the township turned against that ribbon bow, I'd claim that, crippled or not, Love had as good a right to wear something kind o' gay and pretty as any one else."

Aunt Lucinda paid little attention to Seth's remark, for her mind was on her own thoughts.

"All I can lay it to," she said, as though following out some argument, "is that she's heard about Jennie Wade's coming here to be married, and Mrs. 'Liza Bentley making the wedding gown, and all the young folks planning what they'll wear, — and Lucy Flanders that lives over on the old Mill Road going to the store and buying ten yards o' sprig muslin to make her dress of. It's set 'em all by the ears, —

every one of 'em, — so perhaps that's what's taken Love; but I don't know," she added, "I'm blessed if I know."

On Aunt Lucinda's face came a look of apprehension and concern that Seth could not understand.

"Well, howsomever that may be," he declared, "I'll go in and sit with her a spell, I'm thinking." He entered the little sitting-room softly, as though he were crossing the threshold of some quiet and holy chapel.

Love had heard his step and her eyes were turned eagerly towards the door to greet him. The blood had mounted to her cheeks and he was startled by a certain restless excitement that seemed to have laid hold of her. She looked so frail that the unusual color in her face and the brilliancy of her gaze caused a pang of apprehension to shoot through his heart and it rendered him speechless.

"Look, Seth!" she cried, pointing at her ribbon bow; "is n't it as pretty as any

you've ever seen? See how bravely the ends stand up! I'm thinking I look like other girls now, and why should n't I? I'm still young!"

Seth shuffled his feet uneasily on the floor. "It don't seem somehow as though it was you, Love," he ventured, — "and yet I'm not saying it ain't pretty."

Love's face fell a little for a moment, but she recovered herself immediately, and then spoke quickly, — her breath coming in short gasps: "What you said to me some time back about the bell, Seth, made the whole of my heart happy. Do you remember? I have n't slept at night for thinking of it — and I kind o' thought I'd bring a bit of the blue sky down right close to me where I could see it, and then it could snow all it wants and winter storms could rage outside, but my blue ribbon bow would show the bright skies and the sunshine in my heart. Somehow I never felt young before, — and, oh, Seth, I *want my youth!* Something's set

me longing for it, Seth! I used to talk of death, and think it would be welcome, but of a sudden now I want *life*, and I want it with every bit of me!" she cried. "Oh, do you hear me? — do you hear me? I want it with every drop of blood in me!"

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Seth dropped on his knees beside the wheel-chair, and as Love's voice thrilled with her passionate appeal for life, he bowed his head and rested his forehead on her little hand which lay on the arm of it.

"All the days used to be gray to me," she continued, every word sounding tense with emotion. "I felt myself to be separated from joy, from love, — from all the comfort of understanding and being understood, and all of a sudden, Seth, it seems as though a light had come into my life. You told me to listen to the bell, for you would make it speak, — and I've heard what it said! When the silver notes ring out from the steeple I hear them say, 'Love, Love!' That's what you wanted

me to hear, was n't it, Seth? And every time you ring it, the bell says it clearer, and all of a sudden I find I crave all that I have been deprived of — life — youth — all — all that ought to have been mine — all that every creature on this earth has a right to!"

As Love finished speaking, her voice changed and rang stridently and her frail body trembled pitifully.

Seth was too overcome to answer at first, but at last he raised his head and spoke very quietly.

"Little Love," he said, "I'd give every year o' my life and every drop o' my blood so's you could have all that others have. There's not a day passes that my heart don't bleed for you, and when I ring the bell I pour out all that's pent up in me because of you and that I can't seem to find words for."

His big rough hands gathered up her little white one, and he raised it and held it against his cheek as he spoke.

"But don't get to hankering for what can't be, Love, else you'll spoil what we 've got now; and to me what we've got now's a deal sight more beautiful than anything any one else has got. It's just because you are what you are that it seems as though you were the whole wide world to me; and somehow I kind o' think I could n't feel as much if you were like others. I can't seem to say why — but I know it's so."

Seth rose to his feet and stood looking down upon her. His face was pale with emotion and distress.

But the fever of longing that possessed Love could not be appeased in a moment— it had been accumulating for too long a time.

"Jennie Wade's going to be married in the church yonder," she said, speaking her thoughts out impetuously, — "and there'll be flowers and music, and she'll wear a bridal veil, and Mrs. 'Liza Bentley's going to make her wedding gown, and she'll walk up those steps, and the

man she loves'll be waiting for her, and you'll ring the wedding bells, Seth, — and, oh, what a world of joy'll spread out before her! — what a world of joy! Oh, my God, what a world of joy!"

Love covered her face with her hands and without warning sobs shook her from head to foot. They grew wilder and more unrestrained every moment until it seemed as if her very heart would break. Seth was beside himself with dismay and grief. He tried to comfort her; he besought her to stop weeping — to listen to him!

"Little Love," he implored, "don't take on like this, for God's sake, don't!" He leaned over her and smoothed her hair caressingly as though she were a child. "Don't take on like this, little Love — don't — don't!"

But Love could not stop — the cruel sobs threatened to tear her in pieces. Thoroughly alarmed, Seth quickly went to the kitchen and called Aunt Lucinda. She was just outside the door bringing in

some clothes from the line, and at the sound of Seth's voice she put the basket down and quickly entered the house.

"Aunt Lucinda, Love needs you." That was all that was said.

Like a frightened mother-bird she flew to her nestling, and throwing her arms around poor Love's trembling form she crooned over her, and called her by name in a low, soothing voice.

Seth leaned up against the side of the door — his head bowed — his heart torn by the pathos of the picture before him. And with his great pity was a sense of misery that this confusion had entered into the clear, ethereal quality of his intercourse with the poor broken-bodied girl whose lovely face had shone upon him in his dreams like that of an angel. His adoration of her filled every corner of his being like a strain of exquisite music. But now a theme had entered that sounded discordant and sinister to him, and shook his soul with apprehension and dismay.

Finally the quiet of complete exhaustion gradually took hold of Love. The sobbing became intermittent, and at a sign from Aunt Lucinda Seth left the room, and opening the front door very quietly he slipped out, taking pains to close it noiselessly behind him.

As he did so a tall figure with a black shawl on sprang out from behind the lilac bush and stood before him.

It was Hannah Turner. Her eyes were wild and shone threateningly out from her white face. She looked as though her mind were crazed.

"Woe to Love Babbitt! — Woe! — Woe!" she cried in a loud voice with lifted arms; and pointing her finger at the house, "Woe to her!" she cried again. It was all done in the space of a moment.

Then she turned and fled across the road and disappeared around the back of the church, leaving Seth standing motionless by the gate as if a blow had fallen upon him and turned him to stone.

CHAPTER IV

KEEPING THE SECRET

LATER on towards nightfall Seth found himself beside his own lonely hearth in the old gray house by the pine grove. He had a vague recollection of having walked for miles in a sort of dream state — trying to drive out from his mind the sinister forebodings evoked by Hannah Turner's venomous curse on innocent, sweet-faced Love Babbitt. His blood surged in a tumult of wrath. He felt his big hands open and shut as they automatically responded to the host of untamed thoughts of revenge that filtered through his brain.

A fear of unseen, intangible forces took possession of him — not for himself, but for the pure and lovely soul of the woman whose image reigned in the holy tabernacle of his heart. In vain he told himself

that the word of a mad woman was of no avail; for it was evident to him, as he recalled the sequence of events following one upon the other through the day, that superstition and morbid fear had seriously affected Hannah's brain and given her abnormal intuition as to the surest means of cutting a deep furrow in his heart. The cruel subtlety of her revenge appalled him and left him helpless to retaliate. He lit his pipe and pondered long and deeply. And then came back to him Love's ringing cry for Life.

He saw again as in a flash the inner vision of her heart — laid bare to him. Dreamer though he was, he could not shut out from his consciousness the natural human longings that possessed her. He saw as with her eyes a picture of a home all lighted with the warmth and glow of love. He saw her sitting near him, — fashioned strong and lithe as nature meant she should be, — he had for one brief moment caught a glimpse of little

curly heads reflected in the firelight; and then a curtain seemed to fall upon the picture, and instead he saw Love Babbitt as she was, — suffering, — crippled, — helpless as a child, but dearer thus to him than any other woman ever could be.

"It is n't only for this life," he murmured to himself, — "that's not the half of it — I love her for eternity; with a kind o' love that will outlast all changes; whether here or on the other side — it makes no difference."

Seth smoked his pipe in silence for a time and then he spoke again: "If only Love can come to feel like this, then come what may there'll be no parting; somehow we'll find a way of speaking heart to heart, whatever happens." And then came a thought that deepened the lines upon his brow: How protect her from the curse of Hannah Turner?

He seemed to hear that cry again: "Woe to Love Babbitt! — Woe! — Woe!" A sharp pain gripped his heart as he recalled

it. Troubled and uneasy he shifted in his chair and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Old wives' tales!" he muttered angrily. "No curse can harm the innocent!" Yet he was filled with an unreasoning agitation, and unable to control his restlessness he arose and paced the room. Then vivid pictures flashed again before his eyes: Luther Skinner with his old red cap on seemed to mouth at him and mock him from the corner and to repeat his ghostly tales. He passed his hands over his eyes uneasily. Once he thought he heard Love sobbing — sobbing as if her heart would break. He wished with all his soul that he could shut out the sound — he wondered if he ever could forget it.

The room was dark except for the intermittent flickering of the fire, and still he paced it to and fro, and the sound of his feet echoed through the empty house. For the first time in his life he felt nervously overwrought, and every now and

then he paused and listened, and then resumed his pacing.

The sound of a step outside made his heart thump wildly. There was a hurried knock at the door, and a frightened voice called in a low tone: —

"Seth Ware, open the door quick and let me in!"

It took Seth but a moment to slip the bolt, and in pushed the portly and dishevelled figure of Nathan Goodhue, breathing heavily as though he had been running — "Don't ask me anything till I've got my breath," he gasped. "I'm most dead!"

"Whatever's happened?" Seth asked anxiously.

"Whatever's happened?" replied Nathan, puffing and blowing like a pair of wheezy bellows; "I'm that scared I ain't so terrible sure what's happened that I can tell it offhand. I wish I'd never been born," — and he mopped his head with the corner of his bandanna handkerchief.

"Have you bolted the door again, Seth?" he whispered, casting a searching look around him.

He was a piteous object. Fear seemed to cause his bulky form to sag. His cheeks hung colorless and trembling, and his eyes protruded.

"Listen, Seth." He took hold of Seth's sleeve and pulled him towards him, — and putting his mouth near his ear he whispered excitedly: "Hannah Turner's gone daffy, — and she's prowling around the village church screeching 'Woe! Woe!' Her voice sounds something awful, — it's like a wild cat's, — there's naught that's human in it. The village folks have run indoors and slipped the bolts, and claim it's a witch, but I know it's Hannah Turner, 'cause she jumped out at me and I saw her face — 't was a terrible sight, and one I'll never forget. It seemed as though I'd die right then and there when she leapt out at me! I 'most fell over; and when she saw she'd about scared the life

out of me, she threw her arms high in the air over her head and set to wriggling her long, bony fingers like so many snakes and began hooting like a hoot-owl. I felt the blood inside o' me turn cold. No one ever made such a sound before — the ring of the Evil One was in it. But, mind you, that was n't all! — She come and put her dreadful face close to mine and she said, 'I'm accursed! — I'm accursed! I'm here hunting the spirits and I'll find 'em before morning, — they walk here, Luther Skinner says so!'"

As he spoke Nathan trembled all over and was obliged to lean against the wall. "How I got away I don't know," he continued, "for I thought my hour'd come; but I started to run just as fast as ever I could, and, oh, Lord! if she's following, it's certain I'll go stark mad myself! I guess I'm as brave as most when it comes to standing up against flesh and blood, — but when it comes to facing spirits and them as are possessed of devils I'll allow

I ain't to be counted on. — Hush! what's that?"

The two men stood listening.

"I guess I'll call the dog in," Seth said, going as noiselessly as possible to the back door. "Hi! — Bessie," he called softly. "Come here, Bessie."

The dog sprang through the door that was opened sufficiently wide to let her in.

"I guess that's a good plan," whispered Nathan. "Dogs are powerful wise about such things. We'd best all stay in this room and not get separated."

They stood listening again.

"It was the wind moving the shutter that we heard," said Seth. "Like as not it's blowing up for a storm. I'll put another log on the fire. We might as well sit as stand, I'm thinking," — and he drew two chairs near the hearth.

"Stop! Stop!" exclaimed Nathan hoarsely. "Listen again!" They stood motionless.

The dog gave a low growl and listened too.

"Maybe you're right — it might be the wind," said Nathan after a few minutes, and they sat down.

"Nathan Goodhue, I've a question to ask you." Seth stirred the embers, leaning forward in his chair. "When Hannah Turner repeated what Luther Skinner said about spirits walking, did she say aught of the consequences of telling of it?"

"No," replied Nathan; "she said naught of that as I can remember."

"Well, then, I reckon I ought to tell you what Luther said to me, being bell-ringer, — seeing as you've come onto something you had n't ought to know."

Nathan's jaw dropped, and he looked anxiously at Seth.

"Jonathan Barrows told him, when he succeeded him as bell-ringer, about the spirits walking, and Luther passed the secret on to me. But he said to me, as Jonathan Barrows said to him, 'Mind you tell no one, — neither man nor woman, — else ill will befall you'; for, as he ex-

plained, 'it's a terrible thing to pry into the secrets of the dead.' When Luther told me this, Hannah Turner listened behind the door and heard him. And he said to her, 'Woe to you for having done this thing'; and it's my opinion fear of consequences has come upon her and turned her brain."

"Does no one else know this?" asked Nathan, his jaw trembling so that he could hardly speak the words.

"No one," replied Seth.

The flickering light from the embers rose and fell. They sat silently watching it, moving neither hand nor foot. The dog had dropped his head upon his paws and his eyes began to blink drowsily. As the silence deepened and the moments passed, Nathan relaxed a little and he breathed heavily and regularly. Some time elapsed.

Then a strange sound came to their ears that caused them to become tense again in the space of a second.

Seth and Nathan, still motionless, ex-

changed glances. Bessie's ears became pointed and upright.

Again they heard the sound. It was as faint and light as a whiff of wind, but surely it was a laugh, — unearthly and uncanny beyond all description, — it made the flesh creep.

A moment's silence. Then came a soft tap at the window. The dog leapt to its feet as did Seth also, while Nathan cowered farther into his chair and spread his hands over his head as if to protect it from missiles. Thus they remained — listening.

Again came that strange, elusive sound followed by a low, crooning wail that rose and fell; — then as before there was a distinct tap on the window.

"Oh, Lord!" gasped Nathan in a raucous whisper while trembling in every limb — "it don't sound human! I wish I'd never been born!"

Seth had reached for his gun hanging over the chimney, but on second thought

he left it where it was. Bessie began to growl ominously.

Then Seth addressed Nathan, who seemed to be in a state of semi-collapse. "Are you going to help me out in this thing, Nathan Goodhue, or are you going to stay here grovelling? Something or somebody's outside the door and I'm thinking it's not the part of a man to sit still. I'm going to see what it is."

Nathan gave a series of groans. "Such talk's uncommon fine," he chattered, "but you ain't been through what I have! Wait till you have a try at it and you may feel different. There's one thing certain, though, — if you go outside I go, too! I'm not going to stay alone for anybody whether inside or out!"

As he finished speaking the latch of the front door was very slowly raised. The grating of it was distinctly audible, and then came the sound of creaking wood as though a body were pushing against it. Seth went quickly over to Nathan, and

leaning down he whispered in his ear: "I'm going to open the door suddenly. You come along and stand there with me and be ready, no matter what comes."

More dead than alive, Nathan dragged his rotund circumference out of the chair and made his way into the entry where Seth had stationed himself.

Bessie, with a dog's keen intuition, stood ready to spring. When the weird, crooning laugh broke the silence again, Seth gave a warning look at Nathan, and after a moment of hesitation he flung the door open.

They stepped back, instinctively on the defence, as though expecting an attack of some sort — of what nature they were wholly ignorant and could not foresee. There was apparently nothing there! All was quiet outside.

Seth peered into the darkness, and seeing nothing he stepped over the threshold. At this moment Bessie began to bark wildly — running to and fro with her head turned upwards to the sky.

"What ails the dog?" muttered Seth. "I see naught. Here, Bessie, — what's the matter with you, old girl?"

But Bessie continued to bark with her head turned upwards.

As nothing seemed to happen in spite of it, Nathan's curiosity got the better of him, and he ventured timorously across the threshold and went and stood close to Seth, about three feet out from the doorstep. Thus they remained straining their eyes to see into the night.

Suddenly a wild scream rent the silence which made their hearts leap within them and something jumped upon their shoulders, — wriggling — biting — scratching — kicking! In the horror of the moment they were too startled to judge if it were a human being or an animal.

"Catch hold of it!" shouted Seth, as Nathan fell to the earth with the creature upon him.

"Hold on tight while I get a rope!" — and he rushed into the house, reappear-

ing almost immediately with something in his hand.

Choking — sputtering — writhing upon the ground, Nathan held on frantically with one hand while he tried to protect himself with the other from a black object that seemed to claw at him with nails and teeth.

Seth slipped the rope under it and pinioned something back that felt like arms. Almost immediately they were free again and a hand caught at his hair and pulled at it madly. A terrific struggle ensued. Nathan, who was underneath, got the breath nearly knocked out of him. Finally the greater strength prevailed and the black object lay bound securely, but twisting and turning in an attempt to get free.

"I don't need a flicker of light to tell me what or who we've got here!" gasped Nathan, scrambling to his feet with difficulty. "It's Hannah Turner with a devil inside of her — that's who it is!"

Seth went for a lantern, and bringing it outside he looked searchingly at the terrifying visitor who was filling the night air with ghastly cries.

"You're right, Nathan; it's none other than Hannah. She sprang on us from the trellis that holds the honeysuckle over the door. I'm thinking the poor creature's lost her reason. It's a terrible judgment that's come upon her and I'm troubled to know what we can do with her!"

"Well, she had n't ought to stay round in these parts," groaned Nathan, mopping the blood from a deep scratch in his face. "There's no place around here for such folks. She's liable to kill some one if she goes on like this — let alone scaring the life out o' them. And then," he added in a whisper, — "she's got hold of a secret as had n't ought to be known. You must think of that, Seth. It won't do for the village to know what she knows."

"That's true," replied Seth, "and it's well you thought of it; — whatever hap-

pens the secret must be guarded and I reckon we must think it over carefully."

He placed the lantern on the ground, and approaching Hannah cautiously, he tested the rope to see if it was secure.

Little by little her violence was exhausting itself, and it was evident that before long her strength would give out and probably a reaction would set in.

Incoherent sounds, and words interspersed with sentences, which off and on seemed to have some sense to them, escaped from her lips in a continuous stream.

Seth put his arm under her in an attempt to raise her.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Nathan, "whatever are you doing, Seth Ware? You ain't thinking o' bringing her indoors, are you?"

"Yes, I am," retorted Seth rather tartly; "I have no liking for crazy folks, but I'm not one as would leave 'em out in the cold — 'T would go against me. We've got to do a considerable amount of thinking as to what we can do with her.

Luther Skinner is too old to take charge of her, and he's sick all the time, anyway. There's no use taking her back to him."

Hannah's demented brain caught hold of Luther's name.

"Luther's an old hog! He's got a snout!" she cried out. "Woe to him! Woe to him!" This was followed by a loud wail.

"We must get her into the house for fear some one passing over the road yonder should hear her," said Seth hurriedly. "It's late and the night's dark and cloudy — it's not likely that any would be about, but there's no telling. Come here and take her feet, Nathan, and I'll hold onto her shoulders. It's no easy job, for the strength of the Evil One is in her."

Reluctantly Nathan obeyed Seth's command.

"I've been that jumped on and bitten and scratched," he complained, "I ain't hankering after the job, — I'll say that right here, — but I'll not quit now I've got started."

At the touch of their hands Hannah began to twist and turn until it seemed as if the cord would surely break. Nathan puffed and blew with the exertion, but he hung on to her feet with grim determination, while, despite the cold, drops of perspiration poured from his face.

"All right, Seth," he gasped, "I've got hold. I never yet hung on to a wriggling eel, but I guess it's something similar to this. Look out for the step you're coming to and don't trip. I've a notion it would n't take much for her to cut loose and get away."

They surged and swayed towards the door with their unruly burden, and when they finally managed to put her on the floor in front of the fire, they sat down out of breath and exhausted. Hannah's eyes rolled in her head, and strange sounds gurgled in her throat. Her gaze suddenly fell upon Seth, whose head now rested on his hands, and it was evident that he was thinking deeply.

The sight of him stirred a recollection in her. "Crippled Love Babbitt's got a lover!" she cried out, "and she's put a blue bow on her breast to charm him. But she's doomed to die, for I've said, 'Woe to her! Woe to her!' Ha! Ha! Ha! I've said, 'Woe to her! Woe to her!' "

Seth sprang to his feet beside himself with rage and superstitious horror.

"I defy the devil in you to harm the innocent!" he shouted, approaching her in a threatening manner, his face white and quivering. "It's one of Satan's minions that's got inside o' you, Hannah Turner, and he's turning your heart black—there's naught that's human left in you, and 't were better were you dead!"

Seth strode towards her with clenched fists as he said this, his eyes blazing with a dangerous light.

Nathan, stumbling over a chair, put his bulky form in front of him and placed his hands upon his chest.

"I warned you, Seth!" he cried hur-

riedly; "I told you to wait till you had a try at it! I warned you 't warn't pleasant to deal with them possessed of devils! Don't let the devil tempt you!"

Seth clasped his hands over his forehead and took two or three turns up and down the room.

"I'm distraught to know what we can do," he said, — " 't is a terrible situation!" His voice trembled with the effort to control himself.

"Supposing we set to thinking where we can take her," ventured Nathan, choosing the safest seat he could find at the farther end of the room. "Another night like this one," he added, "I'm blessed if I would n't be hooting and gibbering as bad as Hannah!"

"Is n't Zaccheus Bailey a relative of hers?" Seth stood still suddenly and asked the question as if an idea of some moment had occurred to him.

"Not exactly — it's his wife that's related to her — she's half sister to Hannah."

"They live in a great big house near the boundary line," murmured Seth, following his idea. "Maybe they could take her in. I've heard tell of a great garret big enough to hold a dozen such as she. If she could be locked up there without any in the village being the wiser 't would be for the good of all."

"How'd we get her there?" asked Nathan dubiously, nervously fidgeting with his fingers.

"We'll hitch up the horse and cart and take her now." Seth's voice had a tone of decision in it that brooked no opposition, and Nathan was too exhausted to make any.

For the last half-hour the wind had been rising, and it was now shaking the windows of the old house. The chill of an approaching storm was in the air.

When Seth drove the cart up to the door, they looked askance at the blackness of the night around them. The horse could hardly find its way safely in the darkness.

"I've got a big blanket and we'll wrap her in it and fasten her in behind," remarked Seth as he jumped down and opened the front door. "There's no telling but we may have some trouble getting her in."

Nathan had clambered down after him and they cautiously entered the room where Hannah lay bound hand and foot. The sleep of exhaustion had overtaken her, and she lay with her mouth open, breathing heavily.

"I hate to handle her," said Nathan, looking down at her with curiosity, now that she was quiescent. "Folks say that those possessed of a devil exude a poison same's toads. Some say that warts'll cover the hands of them that touches 'em. 'T ain't a pleasant thought!"

Hannah did not stir when they lifted her into the cart. Her sleep seemed to be almost lethargic, and when they had drawn the blanket well over her head, they started on their strange journey. The

horse stumbled along in the darkness. Seth had a lantern with him, but it only sent out a faint ray of light and gave but little assistance to them. They shivered as the wind came in icy gusts across the intervale and lashed their faces and tore at their clothing.

"I'm thinking that if we meet any one who stops to question us," said Seth, " 't were best to say we'd killed a sheep and were taking it over to Zaccheus Bailey's before the snow that's in the clouds came down and blocked us up."

They went on for a while in silence. Hannah still slept, and the two men hid as best they could behind their turned-up coat-collars, and gave themselves up to their own thoughts.

Finally, as they were passing through a portion of the road where they were less exposed to the buffets of the wind, Nathan said: " 'T would be a sorry plight for us if Zaccheus Bailey and his wife Emmeline refused to take Hannah off our hands! I

feel as though we'd had her on 'em for a considerable spell already, and I'll allow it ain't a task I'd take trouble to go seeking for. Opinions differ on such things."

As Seth made no answer, Nathan began again after a pause: "I've heard tell that Emmeline's father was mighty cranky and left an odd kind of a will — leaving her all his money, and cutting off Hannah and Luther without a cent. They made some show of breaking the will, figuring out that he was crazy. Emmeline claimed there was no craziness among his folks and no proof or reason to say aught ailed him and so it stopped there; but Luther's friends said he was right, and there was considerable feeling shown. Whenever any one remarked on it to her she'd always say: 'There never was a crazy Skinner.' It's possible she'll want to keep this about Hannah a secret — I hope she does."

They had been passing under the shelter of a belt of woodland, and as they emerged from it the wind swept the road again

and they crouched down to break the violence of its attack upon them. Suddenly the sound of approaching voices could be heard. Ribald songs and shouting came from somewhere along the road in front of them, and Seth pulled up the horse, undecided for a moment as to what they should do.

"I kind o' thought we'd get through unmolested a night like this," he said. They strained their ears to hear more clearly, but the wind scattered the sound and they were taken by surprise and somewhat startled when a cart loomed up in front of them filled with men returning from a carouse in the neighboring town. Seth whipped up his horse in hopes of getting by without attracting notice, but it was too late. Two or three of the ne'er-do-wells jumped out of the cart and seized Seth's horse by the bit.

"What have we here?" they cried. "Come on and search for that keg of cider that's hidden somewhere under the seat!"

As they were about to make their search despite remonstrances, Seth swung out at them with his whip, and Nathan, full of fight when it came to an encounter with ordinary flesh and blood, took his boot off and belabored one of the befuddled roisterers over the head with it. In the scrimmage they discovered Hannah, wrapped up in the rug.

"Here's a prize worth finding!" they shouted triumphantly, "and it's warm to the touch!"

As one of them tried to draw the rug away from her face, Hannah awoke, and thrusting her head out suddenly she emitted an unearthly screech that rang piercingly through darkness and struck terror to the heart.

The men sprang back dazed for a moment and as if petrified with fear.

"Woe! — Woe!" shrieked Hannah. "Woe to those who touch the dead! I'm dead! — I'm dead! — Woe! — Woe!"

Terrified beyond all power of reasoning,

they turned about and made a mad rush for their cart. The driver and the other occupants, bewildered and aghast, cried out in fright, "It's a witch they've got there!" — and beating their horses they fled in wild disorder down the dark road.

Snow was beginning to fall, and when Seth had gotten his horse to the middle of the road again and they began to journey forth, the wind blew it in their faces, almost blinding them.

Numb with the cold, Hannah had relapsed into her lethargic sleep again, and in silence they made their way as best they could over the rough road.

Presently Seth stopped the horse and peered intently ahead of them. "We must be soon there," he said in a low voice. "I guess it's close by, but it's too dark to see."

He looked again. "I'm thinking that I see the house some rods ahead."

They went on cautiously and Seth drew up again.

"You hold the reins, Nathan, and I'll go

see if I can wake up some one. I reckon Zaccheus Bailey sleeps sound, from the heft of him."

"You ain't thinking o' leaving me alone with Hannah, I presume?" exclaimed Nathan in extreme agitation, "for I say No, right here and now! You take the lantern, and I'll lead the horse after you to the front door. I ain't going to be left alone with her for no man!"

Seth took the lantern and Nathan, with some difficulty, got out of the wagon and they proceeded to make their way to the porch.

When they had sounded the knocker they waited in breathless suspense. No one came, and they knocked again.

After a time they heard some one moving about inside and a window overhead was opened.

"Who's there at this time of night?" asked a thin, metallic voice.

"That's Emmeline," whispered Nathan; "she ain't easy to deal with."

Seth hardly knew what answer to give her, for their errand was a somewhat delicate one, and if it failed he did not know what they could do with Hannah. He ventured on the first explanation that occurred to him.

"We've a sick relative of yours here, marm," he said, "and there's no other way than that you should take her in."

"A sick relative! For mercy sakes, *who?*"

"Hannah Turner," replied Seth. "She's gone plumb crazy and has been screeching around the village church scaring folks out of their wits. They don't suspicion it's she, — they claim it's a witch they've heard, — but Nathan Goodhue here came face to face with her and saw 't was Hannah. She followed him to my home and we've had considerable trouble getting her here. Nathan reckons you'll be glad to hide her in your garret so's folks won't say she come by this through your father. Such talk might cause considerable trouble. Some say you've got a garret big enough to hold

a dozen in it, and it's cut off from the rest of the house. 'T would be a safe place to put her, and no one the wiser."

There was a pause. Evidently Emmeline was thinking it over.

"I don't know what you should come bothering me with a crazy woman for," she remarked testily. "I've no great hankering for crazy relatives!"

"Perhaps not, marm," broke in Nathan hastily. "I'll venture to say none of us has, — but when you think it over the way 't is, — how folks 'll recall about the will and say Hannah come by her craziness through her father, you'll see it different. We thought o' this and we said, 'Emmeline Bailey's got sense, and she don't want trouble.'"

It was evident that Nathan's unexpected persuasiveness impressed Emmeline. She was a shrewd woman and she loved her money.

"Well," she said, "seeing as Hannah's my half sister I guess she best be put where

you say. There's a bed up there and I guess we can get food to her somehow. There's none need ever know if you know enough to keep your mouths shut. You wait there and I'll come and open the door. Zaccheus sleeps sound and I'd as soon he did n't know."

They waited for the door to open with keen anxiety.

"If only Hannah 'll keep on sleeping," said Nathan in a hoarse whisper, "there'll be some chance, but if she starts her shouting and her 'Woe-ing' at Emmeline, there's no knowing."

The door was quietly opened and Emmeline Bailey thrust her head out and whispered excitedly: "Seth Ware, you carry her up and I'll lead the way with the candle. — Don't make a noise, — tread soft, — and don't trip over the rat-trap that's halfway up the stairs."

Seth went to the back of the cart, and putting his arms under Hannah he managed to lift her without much trouble. She was almost rigid with the cold. Even

the cords that bound her felt icy to the touch. She was still sleeping.

Very quietly they mounted the stairs, holding their breath as they passed the room where Zaccheus lay sleeping — and snoring noisily.

When they got to the garret stairs, Seth said in a whisper: "Go put the light in the garret so I can see where the bed is, and then come down, — 'cause if she opened her eyes and saw you, like as not she'd begin to take on again."

Emmeline did as she was told. Then Seth crept up the garret stairs with his fearsome burden.

Hannah began to mutter as he placed her on the bed and put the rug over her, and he hurriedly untied the cords that bound her before making his escape. As he did so her muttering seemed to form itself into definite words and assumed a sort of crooning cadence. Impelled by a sudden curiosity Seth put his ear down to catch the meaning of the weird refrain: —

"And she's — stuck — a blue bow — on her — breast — to charm him! — Ha! Ha! The — poor fool! — A — blue — ribbon bow — on her breast —"

Springing back as if a knife had pierced him he turned and fled from her, closing and bolting the garret door as he went.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTMAS EVE

The time draws near the birth of Christ.
The moon is hid, the night is still;
The Christmas bells from hill to hill
Answer each other in the mist.

LL day long there had been a coming and going in the village. Harvey Shattuck, who kept the grocery store, sent for his nephew Trueman, as was his custom every year, to help him wait upon the run of customers that were wont to besiege his counters the day before Christmas. A stir of pleasurable anticipation was in the air, and every housewife was busily engaged with preparations. A fragrant aroma of baked beans, mince pies, spiced ginger cookies, and such delectable delicacies floated out from the houses and greeted the nostrils of the pass-

ers-by. Every one seemed full of hurry and bustle; even old Mrs. Kittredge, who rarely left her chair by the stove in winter, owing to chronic rheumatism, had walked to the store and back before ten o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Jennings, the butcher's wife, seeing her pass, had put her head out of the window and called over to her next-door neighbor, "I guess there's no mistake it's Christmas to-morrow; — there goes 'Liza Kittredge to the store. She walks about as good as she has these three years past for all her rheumatiz!"

A snowstorm during the night had covered the ground with a thick white mantle, and when the villagers awoke, a scene of beauty was spread out before them. The distant mountains, snow-capped and glistening, encircled the intervale, which sparkled in the December sunshine, throwing out iridescent flashes of color as the rays struck the myriad prisms of empacked snowbanks piled high upon the lowlands and the uplands that border the river

Nashua. It was as if a magic wand had conjured up a wondrous scene in fairyland. Old sagging barns and broken fences were bedecked with chains of icicles; — the branches of the pine trees were garlanded as though with crystal jewels. Thus Nature has her moods of lavishing a wealth of beauty from her secret storehouse overnight upon the old brown earth.

It was close upon sundown when Parson Goodwin chanced to come on Aunt Lucinda, just as she was turning up the pathway to her home.

On seeing him she stopped and turned to greet him. "'T will be a fine evening for the bells, Parson," she said, with a little bob that symbolized a curtsy; "and there'll surely be a grand gathering of waits to sing the carols!"

There were beneficence and sweetness in Parson Goodwin's face, despite a certain austerity of bearing which the clergy of the period affected. He doffed his hat with ceremonious punctiliousness to Aunt

Lucinda, and stopped as though to speak with her.

But she did not wait to hear him. She raised an eager face and said: "Love Babbitt's sore in need of counsel, Parson Goodwin; — the poor girl's mind and heart are tossed; — she's full of trouble."

"I've a little time to spare — I might go inside and talk with her," he answered promptly; and turning in at the gate he added: "There's been some talk about her in the village, I'm told."

"Like as not," was all Aunt Lucinda said as she led the way to the little sitting-room.

There was a look of startled surprise on Parson Goodwin's face as his eyes fell upon Love, sitting as usual in her wheel-chair by the window. She took no pains to greet him; she merely looked at him questioningly with her steadfast gaze.

"My dear young friend," he said, coughing a little behind his hand to hide a sort of confusion that suddenly laid hold of

him, "your cross is, indeed, a heavy one to bear. I'm sure you try your best to bear it with humility."

The pupils of Love's eyes dilated somewhat as she looked at him, and she made no answer.

"These infirmities are sent to subdue rebellious human nature into submission. I trust that you bear this in mind?" The Parson was growing exceedingly nervous under the strain of Love's scrutinizing gaze, and receiving no answer he sat down and sought for his handkerchief and blew his nose deprecatingly.

After a few moments Love spoke. Her breath came quickly, and the feverish flush on her cheeks deepened.

"I used to be resigned to my fate," she said, her voice quavering a little. "But that has left me. Parson Goodwin, don't talk to me like that — about humility and submission and all that sort of thing that sounds like nothing but words; — it just makes me worse. Be like a human being

with a heart that beats in your breast, and tell me how I'm to drive away this longing to live as others live! I kind of feel as though I could not bear it sometimes!"

Shocked at the unexpected rebuke, Parson Goodwin felt the blood mount to his forehead; — but Love paid no heed to it. She went on impetuously: "Ever since Jennie Wade wrote to Aunt Minervy she'd get married here, it seems as though I'd go mad! All the girls come in here with their eyes aglow telling me their secrets. They forget I'm young, too! — they don't sense that I've a heart that can love deeper than theirs can, for I know what suffering is, and so I know what joy *could* be — and that's just the worst of it; I know what it could be, yet I must give up that joy. No one senses it! 'Love's crippled — she can't understand,' they say;— as if these twisted limbs had aught to do with it! I reckon if a poor creature was broken on the wheel, as long as they had breath their heart would go on loving just the same! But,

oh, I want to be like others! — I want my share of life! I do, I do! — I want my share of life same as others have!" Love wrung her hands despairingly.

"You must place your thoughts beyond the grave and not dwell upon this mortal life which is full of vanity and pitfalls," expostulated Parson Goodwin, hurriedly falling into meaningless platitudes to cover his confusion as he began to realize to his discomfort that he was face to face with an unusual situation.

Love gave him no chance to continue. She thrust her hands out in front of her as if warding off a blow. "If those are your words of comfort," she cried, "say no more of them! I will not think of death; — what I want is life! You are a minister and you ought to be able to tell me how to find it, — but you don't, — you talk to me of death instead! But I say it's life I want! — and I want comfort! — and, oh, I want everything that I can't seem to get!"

The words ended in a sort of cry such

as a bird might utter whose strength had gone from beating its wings uselessly against the sides of its cage. They shook Parson Goodwin from his usual calm self-confidence. It was with a certain hesitation that he ventured a reply, but when it came there was a ring of earnestness in it.

"My child, you've started down a path that leads nowhere. However cruel it seems, you are crying out for the impossible. You've always met your misfortune with a seemly grace and an admirable fortitude, and of a sudden you have changed and your mind dwells upon things temporal instead of fixing it upon things eternal. Each soul must meet and overcome its own experiences, and yours and Jennie Wade's are wide apart. Hers are meant for her and yours are meant for you, and so it is with all. Your neighbors comment on this change and take offence that you should think of the vanities of the world. They question why you don a ribbon bow like any foolish village girl in search of

admiration. I doubt its seemliness, and am puzzled by it."

Love's eyes grew strangely big as she listened to him, and her hand caressed the offending bauble that perched so lightly on her bosom. "'T is a bit of the blue sky to me," she said as the blood suffused her face, "and it's the color of forget-me-nots, and it makes me think of the blue of the lake on a summer morning, — sometimes I think it looks like a butterfly that flutters in the sunshine after flowers. My ribbon bow is precious to me."

There was a note of defiance in her tone. Nonplussed by Love's reception of his words of admonition, Parson Goodwin sat in silence for a while. He watched the restless movements of her hands, and wondered at the whiteness of them. He noticed, too, the bright flush on her cheekbones, and the pallor of her brow and temples. He almost feared the searching glance of her eyes, as now and then they rested on him. Used as he was to the meek

reception of his words, doled out in the trite formula which had become the accepted and expected one, he questioned in his mind what course to pursue with this poor wayfarer on Life's road who cast the crumbs of bread he gave her back at him, and called them stones.

He was about to make another effort, when she interrupted him: —

"You do a deal of reading, Parson Goodwin, and folks say you know so much of books and things, and you're versed in all the Scriptures, yet maybe you've never chanced to come across a heart so tossed as mine. I feel that like as not you're unused to things out o' the common. That's why I'm not saying more. I feel somehow as though you would n't understand."

The words startled Parson Goodwin, and caused him to straighten in his chair. A humiliating realization dawned upon him of the seeming hollowness of the sympathy which he was bestowing upon this helpless and unhappy girl, caught in the throes of a

longing for conditions which could never be hers. A strange sense of inadequacy came over him that stirred his pride and caused him in some alarm to look into his heart to see the reason of this failure to fulfil the greatest duty of his calling.

"I would be glad if you would let me try to understand," he said contritely and almost appealingly. "Perhaps I could do so better than you think. But I will listen very earnestly, my child, to whatever you tell me."

"And you won't talk to me that terrible way, — using words without life in them, — that don't seem to mean anything, and that chill the heart?"

"I'll try not to."

"Well, then, Parson Goodwin, listen to me. What can I do to rid my heart of its restless questionings and longings? It seems as though I could n't get back to where I was before. I used to feel content to sit here and have folks dropping in to tell the news; and Seth would come and

tell us of his wanderings in the woods and of all the birds he found, and how his crops were growing; and sometimes he would have a spell of reading books, and then he'd tell about it — and we were happy listening. But ever since he started ringing the bell it's been different. Something's crept into my heart that makes it all a turmoil."

There was a moment's silence.

"You don't mean that you love Seth Ware, the bell-ringer?" Parson Goodwin's voice revealed the shock in spite of his endeavor to hide it.

"I do, indeed," answered Love quietly, and she raised her head proudly as she spoke. "I don't suppose there's any one but me that knows so well what the pain of loving is, — some seem to be fortunate and only know the joy of it, — but it seems now that I can only know the pain of it, — now that I've seen how happy others can be who have nothing in their way to hinder."

There was bitterness in Love's voice as she ended her sentence.

After a few moments of deep reflection, Parson Goodwin asked: "How about Seth, my child? Does he know of this sentiment you have for him?"

"I've told him enough for him to guess," said Love simply. "But Seth loves me like as if he was a dreamer, and I am his dream; — and he likes to have it just that way, — and I did, too, until I began to hear about others planning to have a home together, and having a life in common; — and I got to thinking how it would be if Seth and I were together so's I could n't think of anything else. I let my fancy run on sometimes as I sit here. I see myself sitting near the window in Seth's home, and I see him come to the door and look in, and I hear him say, 'The crops are looking fine, little Love. We're going to have the storehouse filled with corn and potatoes, and the apples are coming on extra well'; and I say, 'Oh, Seth, is n't

it grand to have such fine crops, and to have you make 'em grow so well?' And then I think I see Seth's face all smiles because I praise his work — and, oh, well, I go on thinking and thinking, and it seems as though somehow all the interest I'd take and all the sympathy I'd give might make up for my being crippled!"

There was a lift in Love's voice as she ended the sentence almost as if she were asking a question.

Parson Goodwin gazed at the floor, his brows knit with trouble and perplexity. He did not break into the silence that followed.

Love watched him as if waiting for him to speak. Then she began again: —

"Seth's different from most men. He's lived alone so much it seems as though it might mean a whole lot to him to have some one always sitting waiting for him when he'd come home."

Again her voice lifted tentatively — and again there was a long silence.

Parson Goodwin passed his hand over his brow and changed his position.

"I know I'm a terrible cripple — perhaps I'm so used to seeing myself as I am, I don't know how bad I look — perhaps I'm terrible to look at! — I guess maybe I am!"

Poor little Love Babbitt! Her voice broke hopelessly, and a look half of fright and half of horror crept into her eyes. In a smothered tone she repeated: "I guess maybe I am!"

Then she bowed her head and covered her face with her hands.

Parson Goodwin's warm heart went out to her in pity. He drew his chair up to hers and touched her arm, and this time he spoke simply and directly: —

"Listen to what I say, my child," he said. "I will tell you the truth, and if it pains you, remember it is better to be made to look facts squarely in the face by a friend rather than to be given hollow comfort. You are, indeed, sorely afflicted.

Aunt Lucinda has nursed you and cared for you ever since you met with your great misfortune. Perhaps through her devotion you do not realize how helpless you are, and how wholly dependent on others. She has denied herself in a thousand ways so as to give you a comfortable home. She cooks for you, works for you, and makes her two ends meet so that you may be saved from want. Would you think it right to place so great a care on a poor man's shoulders? And then — and then —"

Parson Goodwin stammered in his agitation. "My child, a man wants a helpmate for a wife — and he wants to hear his children's voices around the house —"

Love took her hands away from her eyes, and she sat very still — looking out of the window. The pallor of her temples shone like alabaster in the gathering twilight. He had spoken the truth as he said he would, but as he watched the motionless figure in front of him, a certain fear

of what he had done took possession of him. He knew that each word as he had uttered it had stabbed poor Love's heart just as ruthlessly as though it had been a knife. He felt as though he had pronounced her death-knell, so strained and rigid were the usually soft outlines of her face as she sat gazing out at the village street. The silence troubled him, and as the moments went by he felt strangely affected by it.

Then of a sudden the air quivered with the first peal of the evening bell. With crystal clearness it rang over the snow-clad fields and out across the intervale — the first sweet herald of Christmas Eve.

As if by magic all the tension in Love's poor frail body relaxed. Wrapt in a sort of ecstasy she leaned forward to listen and as one peal followed another a radiance seemed to envelop her — and lifting her face she smiled and shook her head.

"You don't understand, — he's different," she said, — "and he loves me."

Then, turning away, she became absorbed in listening to the music of Seth's bell.

Very quietly Parson Goodwin arose from his chair and left the room.

In the hall stood Aunt Lucinda waiting — and she led the way on tiptoe to the kitchen. Closing the door, she whispered, "There are some as claim she's had a spell cast over her!" Then, placing her finger on her lips as a warning to secrecy, she added quickly, her face puckered with anxiety:— "Parson Goodwin, did she say aught of the dreadful creature that appeared one night along about Thanksgiving time and howled around the church yonder?"

"No; she made no reference to it."

"There's something strange about that," said Aunt Lucinda excitedly. "I made sure she'd speak to you of it, though no one else has been able to get a word out of her. I can never forget that night! It seemed as though a fiend of Bedlam had got loose! Some say it was a witch, —

some say it was n't flesh and blood at all! — I don't know what to think, but I know that whatever it was it stood outside the house and shrieked, 'Woe to Love Babbitt!' and we heard it howling around the church. I ran into the room where Love was when I heard it outside the window, and I found her sitting up straight in her chair, and her eyes were starting out of her head like, and her face was as white as a shroud, and I took hold of her and the touch of her was cold. Then of a sudden she gasped: 'Maybe it's an omen! Oh, Aunt Lucinda, dear, maybe it's an omen!' I kind o' looked at it that way myself. I could n't see how else to judge of it. She's not been herself since, Parson Goodwin, — she acts unreasonable!"

Aunt Lucinda's nervous little body twitched as she looked keenly and questioningly into the Parson's face.

"I'll allow the whole thing has given me considerable of a shock," she added.

"I found her difficult to understand" —

Parson Goodwin spoke with some confusion. Love's rebuke was causing him to ponder somewhat, and he felt humbled by it. "It is n't possible that Seth Ware, the bell-ringer, would think of *marrying* her?" There was a shocked tone in his voice as he asked the question.

"Seth don't want to marry any one," replied Aunt Lucinda tartly. "He loves my poor girl same as he would an angel, and he's happy when he can come and worship her. Seth's home is no kind of a place for a cripple like Love and I guess he's never as much as dreamed of such a thing. He's one o' the kind as might be called a dreamer, is Seth, and he comes and tells her of his dreams, and that's all he looks for, and that's what he likes best of anything. Love's nature is different. For all she's crippled, she feels more as other folks do."

As they stood silent for a moment they listened to the bell as it rang out from the belfry of the church across the way.

"He certainly rings it fine," murmured Aunt Lucinda thoughtfully. Then she suddenly touched Parson Goodwin on the arm. "Parson," she said eagerly, "they do say that you're a learned man — full of book knowledge and ancient sayings. I'm not notional, but, just the same, I've got kind o' troubled about to-night being Christmas Eve. Do the dead walk a night like this, Parson? Seems as though I could n't stand it if that howling thing appeared again!"

Parson Goodwin smiled indulgently. Aunt Lucinda had touched upon a vulnerable spot in the good man's armor, for his books were his pride and he secretly cherished them. Rather shyly he felt in his vest-pocket and drew out a little worn volume of "Hamlet."

"I was reading a passage just before I left home," he said, "that will answer your question."

And he opened the book where a page was turned down and read:—

"Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The Bird of Dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

Aunt Lucinda stood listening — her head cocked on one side like a bird's.

"Well, I guess likely that's so," she remarked very gently, after a pause.

The lights in the church could be seen now gleaming through the windows. The tinkle of sleigh-bells and the chatter of gay young voices heralded the approach of the gathering church-members and Parson Goodwin hastily wrapped his muffler closely around his throat and hurried across the road.

The air was crisp and frosty. Over in the east a pale full moon was rising behind the snowclad uplands.

Seth Ware stood with upturned face and outstretched arms ringing his bell.

A complete absorption held him — as if the things of the outside world had passed from consciousness, leaving the dominant thought of his life uppermost.

"This one for the Christ — the Holy One," he murmured, as his long arms pulled on the vibrating rope. Then, swaying a little to one side so that he pulled from a different angle — "This one for Love Babbitt," he said.

CHAPTER VI

PREPARING FOR THE WEDDING

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

THE sun had arisen in splendor. Across the intervale the snow-capped mountains shone like a circle of jewels. There was no wind and the air was clear like crystal.

Aunt Lucinda drew a long breath as she came out the front door. "Land sakes alive, don't the air taste good!" she exclaimed, tipping her birdlike head backwards.

News had come through the village, carried from mouth to mouth, that Mrs.

'Liza Bentley had finished the wedding gown sooner than was expected and Jennie Wade and Elisha Green were to be married in two days' time. Elisha's father kept a livery-stable down at Lexington and furnished horses for the stage-coach. A letter had come from him by the last stage saying that "he'd as soon come sooner as later if he was to come at all," and the young people had decided to have the knot tied without further delay.

"There's no good waiting round doing nothing," Elisha Green was said to have remarked by way of explanation. Elisha had not made himself very popular in the village. Widow Haskell's hired man had thrown out some dark hints regarding his habits, having had a fine chance to keep his eye on him, which he had made the most of, and Aunt Lucinda decided, as soon as she could get Love settled in her wheel-chair and set her house to rights, she'd go down the road and see how Minervy took this sudden decision.

Aunt Lucinda had not slept much during the night; her heart was troubled — sorely troubled — and as she trudged down the road she soliloquized to herself: — "With all this fine sunshine you'd ought to feel real good, Lucinda Tracy, — and somehow you don't. And this is Christmas Day and you'd ought to be at peace with all the world, — and somehow you're not, — no one knows it's wrong better than you do, and you'd ought to be ashamed! And if you'll just stand still and look yourself in the face you'll own up it's because that silly Jennie Wade's going to get married and your poor girl's sitting there eating her heart out because she's crippled and can't —"

"Merry Christmas, Lucinda Tracy," called a cheery voice back of her. It was Nathan Goodhue driving along in his pung.

Aunt Lucinda stepped to the side of the road. "Same to you," she answered.

"Want a lift?" asked Nathan, drawing

in his horse. "I guess I know where you're bound to. All the women-folks 'll be heading down Minervy's way to-day to learn about the wedding. Her niece Jennie's not much of a hand at considering folks, it seems. She come down on Minervy without as much as giving her a chance to say she could n't have her and now she springs the wedding on her and expects victuals served afterwards. Some folks gets what they want and some don't. You'd better take a lift so long as it's handy."

Aunt Lucinda had not wholly forgiven Nathan for having exhibited her bonnet on the end of his pitchfork the day of Deacon Joel's and Deacon Silas's funeral, but the walking was pretty slippery and the seat looked inviting, so she climbed into it.

Nathan's face was ruddy and round and beamed with a holiday smile. "Fine Christmas weather," he remarked cheerfully. "*Git* up, there!"

The old horse gave an encouraging show

of animation by lifting his heavy hoofs off the ground in an ungainly attempt at a gallop for a few yards, which set the sleigh-bells jingling.

"Yes, *sir*, — Minervy's had a hard time with those young folks since they come. — That Elisha's not much to speak of."

"Kind o' spotted in the face," said Aunt Lucinda with a sniff.

"That's so," replied Nathan, whose eyes twinkled over her tone of voice. "I kind o' question the shape of his legs — they knock some."

"His legs don't bother me — he can knock 'em all he wants: — it's his loud voice and uppish ways I mind," snapped out Aunt Lucinda. "If I was Minervy I'd manage to take him down a peg."

"Well, he got Jennie, spotted face and all, come to think of it," retorted Nathan, on the broad grin.

They jogged along the road in silence for a while.

"Truth is, Lucinda Tracy," said he suddenly, "you never was much on men. I'll allow I'd kind o' like to see what you'd do if you had a man to look after, and he tracking in dirt onto your shiny floors and leaving tobacco 'round, and sitting with his feet upon the stove with his chair tipped back, snoring like a trumpet!"

Aunt Lucinda was horrified beyond words. She sat right round in the pung and looked at Nathan.

"What I'd do!" she exclaimed. "Well, I guess I know what I'd do well enough. I'd pitch him out the front door quick and throw his tobacco out after him, and there'd be no time lost either!"

Nathan's eyes almost disappeared behind his fat, rosy cheeks as he chuckled with supreme enjoyment. "Oh, Lor!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Lor, Lucinda Tracy — ha! ha! ha! Oh, Lor!" —

"Oh, Lor, yourself," she answered with some show of defiance and asperity. "What any one wants with 'em I don't know. I

never saw a man yet that did n't mess up the whole house and every one's time taken up cleaning up after him."

"They're kind of handy 'round, just the same," ventured Nathan, as he drew up alongside of the road to let a big sledge filled with heavy logs go by; "and, look a-here now, there was a time, Lucinda Tracy, when you cocked your eye at the fellows with the best of them! — I remember it, I do, — just as though it was yesterday" — and Nathan wagged his head and laughed uproariously.

Aunt Lucinda puckered her mouth up and sat very straight. Nathan's laugh always vexed her. The pung slid over the snow very comfortably when they got back into the middle of the road. They passed groups of boys and girls dragging sleds towards the rolling pastures where the coasting was good. Their voices sounded clear and penetrating in the frosty air, and from them emanated invisible waves of youth and exuberance. Some association of ideas

seemed to strike Nathan and cause him to quiet down for he said suddenly, "How's Love Babbitt, Lucinda?"

"Well, I don't know as I can say just how she is. Seems as though there was something I can't make out."

"How's that?"

"Well, it does seem as though ever since Seth began to ring the bell she's not herself, Nathan. Seeing as you've known her all her life, there's no harm saying it. No one can make it out — leastways, I can't."

Nathan began to fidget with the reins and he knit his brows together.

"Love's always been a sensible girl and borne her troubles well, but now she frets because she's not like others; that's not so strange, perhaps, either, but there's something I can't seem to lay a-hold of — and, look at it this way or that, somehow I lay it to the bell!"

"Seth rings it fine," remarked Nathan, glancing curiously at Aunt Lucinda.

"He do, indeed," she replied, "*when he rings it*" — and she turned in her seat and looked him in the face.

"Whatever do you mean by that, Lucinda Tracy? Who'd ring the bell but Seth?"

"That's what I want to know, Nathan. I'm troubled — and I sense things I can't seem to see or feel. You know well enough I'm no hand at getting notions about things. What I can touch and see and smell 's what I believe in as a rule. There's one thing I know, though, — say what you will, — and that is there's things going on some of us can't see." Aunt Lucinda's voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper.

Nathan's rosy cheeks faded perceptibly. "Speak out plain, Lucinda," he said nervously, in spite of a poor attempt to hide his feelings; "I'm no hand at guessing riddles. Speak so's I can take your meaning."

"Well," replied Lucinda, "it's just this: I know when Seth rings his bell — he rings

it fine. I listen to it and it sounds sweet and clear as it answers all the vesper bells at sundown; but sometimes when I listen I hear it change, — it gives another tone, —it makes me feel all wee-wah and creepy-like for all it's so beautiful to hear, and I tell you, Nathan, there's something there beyond our ken, — something we can sense if we can't see it or know it for sure; and Love hears it, too, though she says nothing, and it seems as though she gets under the spell of it; — I'd as soon you did n't repeat what I say, just the same."

While Aunt Lucinda was speaking Nathan's face began to sag; his jaw dropped and he was visibly upset.

"Lucinda," he said with agitation, "I guess you've been making your dish o' tea too strong. Come supper-time you'd best keep to a mug o' milk. Some folks can't stomach the tea right. Whoever heard of such notions as you're telling me! I declare, Lucinda, it beats all!" And he gave a flick with his whip at the old horse

which set him galloping down the road while the sleigh-bells jingled confusedly.

"It appears to me you know something," remarked Aunt Lucinda, straightening her bonnet which the sudden jerk had displaced. "You never were much of a hand at making-believe, I'll say that much. But as long as I've said what I have I'll say more. Something's come over Seth Ware that was n't there before. I've watched him when he comes from ringing, and just so often as I've heard the strange tone in his pealing I've seen an odd look upon his face, — same as though he'd been a long ways off and was n't yet back; his eyes look dreamy, and it seems as though he wanted folks should n't speak to him."

Aunt Lucinda's shiny eyes scanned Nathan's face narrowly as she spoke. He hunched his back up and pushed his cap down farther on his head.

"I don't know nothing whatsoever," he said.

Now, Aunt Lucinda found a certain

comfort in speaking out her thoughts to Nathan. He was of the village — born and bred in it. The joys and sorrows that had passed through it belonged to both of them. Each could say, "Do you remember," etc. — that subtle binding link that endears old friendships; and she could with safety speak out what was on her mind.

"When I know what I'm fighting I can fight as good as anybody," she continued after a pause. "But I'll allow this thing, whatever it is, troubles me, — I can't seem to shake it off. Look at it as you've a mind to, it's something to scare one, — it's bearing on me night and day."

There was a slight quaver in her voice that touched Nathan Goodhue's kind heart. He glanced at the little spare woman beside him and noticed that her face bore the marks of anxiety and care.

"Lucinda Tracy," he said compassionately, "you've done well all along — nobody can gainsay it — you've stood up

against odds many a time and won out. Don't you go to getting fussed up about this thing — you just forget about it. — 'T ain't well to dwell on such happenings."

Her penetrating glance searched his face again.

"Love's all the world to me, Nathan," she said very gently.

"I know, I know, Lucinda, — and nothing 'll happen to Love, — leastwise, don't go looking for anything. Just keep right on and say to yourself, 'I know it 'll be all well with Love,' — and you'll end by thinking so."

"Nathan," said Aunt Lucinda, "a curse has been put on my dear girl." Her voice was very low and trembling with agitation as she said this. "A terrible creature, in or out of the flesh, I don't know which, stood by the window and screamed with a terrible voice, 'Woe to Love Babbitt!' and ever since then it looks to me as though Love were failing." The words ended in a sort of sob, though the valiant little fig-

ure sat bolt upright with no show of flinching.

Nathan's face had flushed and he gave vent to a long, low whistle. "Did Love hear it?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes."

"Ah — that's bad."

They had reached Minervy's house, and he stopped the pung so that Aunt Lucinda could alight. Just as she nodded a silent good-bye to him he spoke hesitatingly, but with genuine feeling.

"Lucinda Tracy," he said, "it might be as well to consult Parson Goodwin. Supposing you're right in what you say, he's a good man — he might know how to remove whatever harm's been done. I've heard tell of such things. It would do no hurt to try."

Nathan showed such agitation as he spoke that Aunt Lucinda turned on him quickly.

"Speak out, Nathan," she said, catching her breath excitedly, "speak out, for you

know something you could tell if you'd a mind to!"

But Nathan hurriedly gathered up the reins and started his old horse.

"I know nothing," he replied in some confusion, and before she could say anything more to him the pung was on its way down the road and the jingling of the sleigh-bells rang merrily out in the crisp air.

With a sense of disappointment Aunt Lucinda turned and knocked at the door — then turned the handle and went in.

She entered upon a scene of confusion. Minervy Wade, with her skirt pinned up and enveloped in a large brown and white-checked apron, was baking pies, and with her was Mrs. Jennings, the butcher's wife, peeling apples.

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Aunt Lucinda. "I came down here a-purpose to wish you a Merry Christmas, Minervy, but I guess the least said the better. This don't look much like Christmas Day in *this* kitchen!"

"We're all terrible sorry for Minervy," said Mrs. Jennings. "She'd planned a real nice wedding for her niece, but she never had a notion the day'd be sprung on her like this, and no time for fixings. Seems that nowadays the young folks make the old ones do the trotting. I tell Minervy she's well rid of any one who treats her so mean."

Minervy took a pie out of the oven and looked at it.

"I'd planned my bonnet and it was to be real pretty," she said in a tearful voice — "and I'd got my dress half-fixed. Land knows what I'll put on my back now. I never felt so fussed up in my life, — seems as though I was all of a tremble. I don't know how ever I'll get through. I said to that Elisha Green, 'It appears to me it would n't be amiss if you and Jennie set to work to help some.' He tossed his head as high as you please, seeing as his folks live in Lexington and he the son of a livery-stable man that keeps eight horses. 'Whoever heard of a bride and bridegroom

cooking their own wedding feast?' he answered, as highty-tighty as a deacon; and he took Jennie by the hand and they went out the door, and I expect they're gallivanting round the village at this very moment." Minervy sniffed ominously and her face was beginning to pucker.

Mrs. Jennings made a sign to Aunt Lucinda and, putting her hand to her mouth, whispered loudly, "I'm fearful of a flow o' tears!"

"Come now, Minervy!" exclaimed Aunt Lucinda quickly; "I can't stay very long, but I'll do what I can to help out," — and she hung her cloak and bonnet on a peg behind the kitchen door. Sitting down next to Mrs. Jennings she began to peel apples vigorously.

"It don't seem much like Christmas doing this sort of thing," she said conversationally; "I feel as though we'd ought to be up on the hill listening to the bells. I heard Lancaster bell ringing as I came in — the air was so clear I heard it fine."

"I heard Shirley bell this morning," said Mrs. Jennings; "it certainly sounded pretty, and Seth's bell was answering grandly. I guess they must have heard it all through the intervale. You've heard about Luther Skinner's sister Hannah, I suppose," she added suddenly; "it's hard on Luther."

"What about Hannah?"

"Gone off," answered Mrs. Jennings, cutting the apples in quarters and putting them in a bowl. "Cleared right out without saying a word to Luther, and he sick and no one to look after him. It certainly looks odd. Luther says Hannah was always that way — first here and then there, and he guesses she's gone up Vermont way — she's got a cousin there she might ha' gone to. But she did n't let on to any one she was going. Luther seems kind o' worked up about it, and I don't blame him."

"Maybe he is," said Minervy, "but if I was he I'd as soon she'd be gone. I

never liked her looks, and I guess there's a considerable number round here who are scared of her tongue. Now, Lucinda, you might come and help me count the pies."

While Aunt Lucinda was busy with Minervy, Love was sitting in her usual place looking out upon the village street. The sleighs passed frequently and the jingling of the sleigh-bells and the happy voices of family groups enjoying the holiday reached her through the window, but she barely heard them; her thoughts were centred on the conversation of the night before with Parson Goodwin. The wild longing that she had allowed to lay hold of her had been mortally wounded during her talk with him, and in the hours that followed, her heart and soul lay prostrate as the cold, relentless wind of reality against which she had fought swept over them in an icy blast.

Through the night, during those long

hours when the quickened consciousness sees with threefold clearness, visions of what she imagined might be, and what she knew *must* be, passed in an endless chain before her. Each picture of her blighted life brought its own pain and bitterness, and in the darkened room she wrung her hands and her heart cried out in its despair — impotent against what seemed to her the hopelessness of her destiny. Poor little Love Babbitt — caught by the edge of the vortex into which strong and weak alike are swept, much as leaves that in floating down a stream are drawn into the whirlpool and submerged.

When morning came, weak and exhausted though she was, she had not wholly given in, and with a certain bravado she had pinned her gay ribbon bow on her breast and taken her seat as usual at the window.

Aunt Lucinda had been gone some time when a pung filled with several young people came down the road, laughing

gayly with the exuberance of youth and the keen enjoyment of the holiday. The crisp air had brought the glow of warm red blood to their cheeks and with them went a wave of pulsating life and health that seemed to brighten the whole scene. Love did not recognize them at first, but when they stopped before the door and stepped from the pung she saw Jennie Wade and Elisha Green, and with them was Lucy Flanders and Harvey Shattuck's nephew, Trueman, who hitched the horse to a tree and came with the others to the door. Seeing Love sitting there they signed to her that they were coming in, and when the door opened she made an involuntary motion of shrinking back as though the atmosphere they brought with them was too full of vitality for her to bear in her weakened condition. Unconscious of this, however, they sat down opposite her.

"We've come to say Merry Christmas!" exclaimed Jennie Wade gayly;

"and I thought I'd bring Elisha in for you to see. I'm showing him off before the wedding for fear he might lose his looks afterwards!"

They all laughed loudly at this, and Trueman rolled sheep's eyes at Lucy, and asked how soon she would consent to show him off!

After a few more such bantering remarks, interspersed with whispering and more laughter, Jennie turned to Love again: "We've all been 'round everywhere shocking the neighbors," she said; "they think I ought to stay indoors until I appear at the altar as a blushing bride;—but I don't care what they think, I'm going to get all the fun I can. If Elisha and I were cooped up in Aunt Minervy's little house waiting for the happy moment, we'd grow tired, would n't we, Elisha?"

"Kind o' sassy, it looks to me!" said the young man in question, turning to Love with a broad grin. "But just wait till we're married!"

Lucy and Trueman greeted this with cheers and Jennie pouted and turned her back on them.

"You'd ought to see the wedding dress!" said Lucy. "My! but it's pretty! And Jennie'll be as handsome a bride as you could find in it; — and we'll all be jealous of her! I've got a dainty dress, too, to wear; it's a sprig muslin, and I'm going to wear a pink bonnet with a rose in it."

"Have pity!" cried Trueman, beating his chest dramatically — "can't you see that such a picture pierces my heart like an arrow?"

Lucy pushed him by the shoulders and called him a "silly thing," and Jennie playfully slapped Elisha because he had slipped his arm around her waist.

Love's face grew paler and paler as she sat listening. What had she to do with youth like this? They talked an unknown language to her!

Suddenly Jennie looked at her, and her

eye lighted on the ribbon bow. She put her hand to her mouth and snickered, which attracted the attention of the others, and they in turn snickered and exchanged glances. The blood flew to Love's face and suffused it. She was taken aback! She did not know which way to look.

An association of ideas seemed to form itself unconsciously in Jennie's mind.

"I suppose that queer gawk, Seth Ware, will be tingling the wedding bells," she said irreverently. "He looks to me as sombre as a crow. It would be kind o' fun to stir him up and make him step lively! I'm told that he lives in a house all alone. What's the matter with him that he don't get a wife and act like other folks?"

"He'd ought to get a good, strong, healthy girl to marry him," put in Elisha. "One that has some cash tucked away against a rainy day, and that would keep his house clean for him, and know how to cook him a good supper when he comes

in at night. That's the kind for Seth. He needs some one who can shoulder things for him and keep things spick and span."

"Is that your ideal of happiness?" Love's voice sounded strange to her own ears. Her throat was dry and she could hardly speak.

"It's a pretty good way to happiness," answered Elisha lightly. "If there's one thing a man can't abide, it's a woman who is lying around the house doing nothing, and ailing all the time — it sickens the heart out of him, and it's no fault of his if he goes casting an eye around elsewhere. I tell you what it is," he continued, bringing his fist down upon his knee to give greater emphasis — "there's no use talking — a man gets mighty tired of any one who don't make him comfortable! — I've said that plain to Jennie right along — have n't I, Jennie?"

"Well, I know how to cook," she replied with a toss of her head, — "and I know how to darn stockings, — what more

could you ask, I'd like to know?" And Jennie made a little face at her exacting betrothed that set them laughing again.

"What's the good of talking about what a man likes and what he does n't!" exclaimed Lucy Flanders — "Love's crippled and can't marry, anyway. She don't care for all your talk, — she'd rather hear about something else, — I know she would."

"Well, now, I'm not so terrible sure," retorted Elisha with lumbering jocoseness; "look at the perky bow Love's got on! You can't tell me it's just for Aunt Lucinda she wears it! Looks to me as though Love had a mind to angle with the best o' them" — and Elisha laughed a waggish laugh and stuck his tongue in his cheek.

This clumsy bantering appalled Love Babbitt. She looked at Elisha's red face and already thickening body, and shrank from the coarseness she saw lurking in the corners of his mouth and the bold glance of his eyes. He belonged to a type of

which she had no knowledge, and which filled her with dismay.

"I hope he really loves you, Jennie!" she said, turning sharply towards her with a frightened look, and speaking her thought out impetuously. "I hope he loves you for what you are and not because he thinks you pretty!"

Love's eyes were filled with questionings — her face was very white.

"I'd just as soon he'd love me for my face," said Jennie with a self-conscious giggle. "I guess he cares considerable about it, don't you, Elisha Green?"

Elisha's response was an attempt at affectionate effusion which was met with renewed giggles and artful rejoinders.

Love shrank back in her chair. So this was what those about her were like when they were supposed to be in love! What, then, was her feeling for Seth that struck so sharply at the very heart of her being and that bore no vestige of semblance to the futile ridiculous coquetry of Jennie

Wade on the one hand, nor the coarse effrontery of Elisha Green on the other?

Lucy Flanders noticed the expression on Love's face. She was a tender-hearted girl and she always meant to be kind, but like many who have had no experience to guide them she invariably blundered from a lack of tact and imagination. So in her desire to express sympathy she unconsciously trampled ruthlessly upon Love's over-sensitive nature.

"I should think, Jennie Wade," she exclaimed, "that you'd know better than to sit up love-making with Elisha right before Love, who can never know what it is to have any one spoon with her! She must think you're terrible silly! Any one crippled like her don't want folks spooning round and making her feel she's different from others! I'm real sorry for you, Love, — we all are," she added, kneeling down next the wheel-chair and taking hold of Love's hand. "Of course, any one sick like you don't expect any one should want

to be love-making with them, — but, just the same, it must be awful hard, — only I suppose, as you've never known different, it is n't, maybe, so bad. You're real sensible, Love, — I know you are, — though folks do kind o' poke fun at your ribbon bow. I wish you'd take it off, dear, — it don't look right somehow on any one so sick as you. It makes your face look awful pale and drawn-like. We just hate to see it. If you'd been well like us, Love, I guess you'd 'a' had a real pretty face — I do, indeed! There's nobody around these parts but thinks a lot of you, — and that's something, anyway, to lay hold of." And Lucy's soft hand smoothed Love's hair close to her temple.

Love drew her head away quickly. The shadows around her eyes deepened. She looked at Lucy and saw how young and strong and buoyant she looked, and how pretty as she knelt beside her, — and her eyes glanced from her to Trueman Shattuck's round, honest face. "They 'll

marry," she thought, — "there's nothing to prevent, — they're well matched," — and she looked at Jennie, rosy and blooming in the vigor of young womanhood. She marvelled that she could bestow so great a possession on such a coarse mate as Elisha Green; yet in his way he was eligible, — he could play his part in the world; and then her eyes fell on her own poor twisted limbs outlined under Aunt Lucinda's knitted shawl!

"Why, Love! — you've grown so white! You're not going to faint, are you?"

They all crowded around her with frightened faces, for she suddenly began to sink down into her chair. Lucy arose hurriedly from her knees.

"We've stayed too long, maybe," she said. "We'd best go."

"Yes — go, please," gasped Love in a faint voice. "I'm all right — only tired, but I'd be glad to be left alone."

They whispered together questioning what they had best do.

"Aunt Lucinda's helping out Aunt Minervy with the pies. I guess we'd better go find her," said Jennie.

They all moved quietly towards the door, but Lucy, looking back, saw Love's head thrown back upon her pillows, — her face tense with an expression of agony, whether of body or mind she could not tell; but she ran back impulsively and kissed her on the forehead and then as quickly rejoined the others as they were passing out the front door.

Trueman Shattuck saw tears lurking in her eyes as she came towards him, and he caught her hand in his — "Bless you for your woman's heart," he whispered, his eyes glowing with real emotion.

Outside the gate they consulted again and Lucy and Trueman decided to sit on the church steps across the way so as to be near at hand, while Jennie and Elisha hurried down the road to find Aunt Lucinda.

Oh, the loyal, valiant heart of Aunt

Lucinda! How it leapt with fear for a moment when Jennie ran into the kitchen where she and Minervy were busy with the pies and said in breathless haste, "Love don't seem well, Aunt Lucinda, and I've come to tell you!"

Aunt Lucinda often said afterwards that she never could forget the moment when, out of breath and exhausted from hurrying so fast, she finally got home, and on opening the front door and entering her eyes fell on Love, apparently lifeless, — her head hanging over the side of the chair, — and what was that crumpled object on the floor, across the room? Aunt Lucinda felt a gulp in her throat and she looked again — Alas! — poor Love! — it was the ribbon bow — twisted and misshapen as though her hands had crushed it fiercely when she tore it from her breast and flung it from her!

CHAPTER VII

NATHAN AND SETH VISIT ZACCHEUS BAILEY AGAIN

TOWARDS dark the following day the village street was still dotted with groups of eager women discussing the wedding. The wind had changed to the east during the night and had brought up a blanket of gray clouds with which to cover the sky, and there was a raw chill in the air.

Mrs. Jennings, the butcher's wife, had remained with Minervy for some time after the bride had left and had helped clear away the dishes and straighten out the furniture. On the way home she stopped to talk to old Mrs. Niles and Widow Haskell, and some of the neighbors joined them.

"There certainly was something askew about the wedding, say what you will, —

though Jennie was as handsome a bride as ever I see," Widow Haskell remarked reflectively to them.

" 'Liza Bentley certainly did well by the wedding gown, — 'Liza has taste and there's no denying it. But, my land! it seems as though it were n't worth the trouble to make such a fuss for a man like that Elisha Green! My hired man could tell some things if he chose, but I said to him, 'Keep your mouth shut — he's nothing to you.'" And she swept a glance potent with meaning from one to another.

They all nodded comprehendingly.

"Minervy seemed to feel real bad during the ceremony," said Mrs. Jennings after a pause. "When Elisha put the ring on Jennie's finger she gave way to a mighty flow o' tears, and it was some time before she could sit up straight in her pew, — I know, 'cause I watched her. Parson Goodwin looked sort o' provoked at her, I thought, — I expect he thought it out o' keeping with the occasion; but I will say

right out here, it were n't nice of Nathan Goodhue to whisper so's all could hear, 'There she goes, by heck!' — it set the boys to snickering."

"Sometimes Nathan has no sense at all," said old Mrs. Niles disapprovingly. "Maybe Minervy feels more than most do, and, anyway, she felt bad about Lucinda not being at the wedding, they've been close friends these long years. Has any one heard how Love Babbitt is since morning?"

"I'm fearful the poor girl's badly stricken," replied Mrs. Jennings. "I'm told Parson Goodwin was with her a long while before the wedding, — but no one else has seen her. They do say that Seth Ware looks as white as a walking ghost; Mr. Jennings saw him this morning and he said it gave him a scare."

"I wonder if it was he rang the bell?" asked Widow Haskell, as if a new idea had occurred to her. "Seth always puts a kind of rhythm into his ringing, and to-day more

than one remarked on how queer it sounded — it seemed to go all hickelty pickelty!"

"Seth rang it, but I guess he did n't much know what he was doing," replied Mrs. Jennings, putting her hand over her mouth — a gesture that was meant to suggest the advisability of secrecy.

"There are some that claim Seth's got a real feeling for Love; but then folks get queer notions, — men are n't likely to take over-much to cripples; but then again Seth's odd — he don't seem to mix with other folks — he's kind o' different."

"There he goes now!" she added suddenly. They all turned round to look at him as he went hurrying down towards the road leading to the river.

"Wherever is he going, I'd like to know?" said old Mrs. Niles, craning her neck, while a gleam of curiosity flashed from her sunken eyes.

"Looks to me as though he were headed down towards Luther Skinner's house," suggested Mrs. Jennings.

They all stood and watched him.

Unconscious of their speculations concerning him, Seth was turning over and over in his mind the events of the last few days. Aunt Lucinda had hurriedly sent for him that morning and told him what had happened as far as she knew. Love was silent as to the cause of her sudden seizure, but Aunt Lucinda was quick at putting two and two together and she divined the greater part of what Love did not tell. Seth had bowed his head in his hands when she told him of the ribbon bow.

"Oh, my God!" he had murmured — "poor little Love!"

His very soul was torn by the fact that it was his duty to ring the wedding bells. He instinctively felt that each peal was like an arrow piercing the heart of the one he loved. "How could he make her understand his anguish?" he asked himself. When the time came for the bell to ring, his hands had trembled as though he were

palsied; but an occurrence that happened at that time was his reason for now hurrying down to Luther Skinner's house.

The old man heard him as he turned in at the gate, and tapped on the window, signalling him to go round to the back door. Seth did so, and noticed that some one had evidently been there before him, for there were footprints on the snow.

When he went in, Luther called out to him in his cracked and complaining voice: "Come this way, Seth, — I can't leave the stove, — the house is cold, — no one here to heat it up for me, — and I all full o' pains and rheumatiz. You'll have to get a chair and sit so's I can talk without turning my head."

Seth entered the room and did as he was told. Luther, with his old red cap on, was huddled in a rocking-chair. A discolored dressing-gown was wrapped close about him and soiled white socks were in wrinkled folds about his ankles. The old man presented a startling picture of poverty, and

Seth noticed that his features were even sharper and thinner than the last time he visited him, and the dust that lay upon the floors gave evidence of a complete neglect.

With his usual directness Seth put the immediate thought into words: "Don't some one come in here to look after you, Luther? You're in kind o' bad shape, it appears to me — strikes me you've slipped downwards since I was here last."

"I'm all full of rheumatiz," replied Luther in a whining voice. "Old Mrs. Niles down the road comes in and gets the stove going and brings me my dinner — that's all I want, anyway. I ain't going to have her or any other women-folk nosing round trying to see what I got — I would n't trust any of 'em." And Luther shuffled his old slippered feet impatiently.

"When old Mrs. Niles comes here by what door does she come?"

"Same door you come in by," answered Luther, his sharp eyes glancing quickly

at Seth's face. "Sit down, Seth, and speak out what you've got to say — you come here to say something."

"I come here to ask you about things you spoke of last time I was here," said Seth, drawing his chair up to Luther's. "I've thought considerable about — about the bell, and I'd be glad if you'd speak out your mind, Luther, — I've had a strange experience."

"Ah —!" Luther gave a low, drawn-out exclamation and put his hand on Seth's knee. "You've seen 'em, then?"

"I've sensed them," stated Seth in a low voice — "but only when I've felt serene and happy-like, — for I love to ring the bell, Luther, — it seems as though it was a part of me."

"The *real* bell-ringer feels that way," assented Luther, — his face softening a little, — "other folks don't understand it, — but one that's by nature a bell-ringer, — he feels best when ringing, — but you don't find many of 'em."

"Well," continued Seth, "I've had strange hours of happiness off and on when ringing, and I feel there are those around me that I can't see, but that feel *with* me, — I have no fear of 'em at all. I somehow feel that they, too, love the bell and help me ring it; and when I come away I feel as though I'd been in company with folks that breathe a clearer air than we do here, and the ugly things one hears about all fall away, and only what is fine and beautiful remains. The feeling lasts for quite a spell and then it goes."

"Jonathan Barrows said the same," remarked Luther reflectively — "he was a real bell-ringer — I'll allow, Seth, I ain't that kind. I respect the dead, and wish 'em well, but I'd as soon they did n't seek my company, as I'm not seeking theirs. I seen 'em as I told you, — but I can't say as they were welcome, — I might as well speak the truth about it."

"Once or twice I came near seeing them," — Seth's face took on the dreamy

look that Aunt Lucinda spoke of, — "and they seemed so near I could have touched them had they been o' flesh and blood. Some day maybe I'll see their faces. I reckon they're kindly. But this ain't all I've come to say. I also come to speak of Hannah."

"Say naught of her!" exclaimed Luther excitedly. "She bears my curse upon her. She heard the things that were n't for her to hear — let her bear the consequences. She went away and she'll not come back."

"The punishment fell quick upon her!" said Seth gravely. Then, leaning close to the old man's ear and glancing involuntarily around the room, he whispered: "Hannah Turner lost her wits as soon as she left this house, and if it had n't been for her following Nathan Goodhue over to my house, the whole village would have known what it were best they'd never know. We found a place to hide her, Luther, where 't is safe and where she need not suffer. May Heaven take note we did

this thing, for it went sore against us, seeing that before she followed Nathan she threw the curse upon the pure and blameless soul of poor Love Babbitt." Seth's voice shook as he spoke. "'Woe to Love Babbitt!' she cried; 'Woe! Woe!' I could have killed her for it with my hands upon her throat! — and gladly! — and I'm fearful I would do it now, if it was n't for the bell, — it's that that somehow saves me from the crime!"

As Seth ended, he wrung his hands and bent his head so that Luther could not see his face. Presently he continued: "She's hidden in the garret down at Zaccheus Bailey's on the border line, and no one's the wiser. 'T is to be hoped that Emmeline keeps watch, — something makes me fearful, — yet it may be only fancy."

Luther looked at him inquiringly, having listened to his tale with breathless eagerness; but a sudden thought struck him and he burst into a wheezy, crackling chuckle. "'There never was a crazy Skin-

ner,' that's Emmeline's pet phrase, and she knowing better! It's a black crow come home to roost this time, — sure's you're born! It's best for Emmeline to watch she don't get loose!" And he shook his head from side to side in ghastly merriment.

Seth's mind was too preoccupied to heed him.

"What you say is right — 't were best she don't get loose," he said quickly; "and when I think of where she is I don't see how she can; but whether it was the wind, or what it was, I cannot tell, but when I rang the wedding bells to-day I was so sore distressed my hands could hardly hold the rope, and once I seemed to hear a sound the like of which I never heard but once — the night that Hannah followed Nathan to my home; — but 't was something like a laugh — and yet so faint I could not say for sure I heard it."

"That's strange!" ejaculated Luther

with surprise, — "that sounds like what I heard last night. I took it for a cat, and yet again I questioned at the time if I was right."

"There are footprints out there in the snow — a track of them goes round the house. I noticed them first thing."

As he spoke Seth arose from his chair and went outside — walking carefully and glancing here and there upon the ground. Then he returned and took his seat again.

Luther's eyes were fixed upon his face questioningly. "There's been none round here that I know of," he remarked as if divining Seth's question before it came.

"I feel uneasy, Luther Skinner!" the latter exclaimed suddenly. "If Hannah should escape from Zaccheus Bailey's house she might go straight to Love Babbitt and give the curse again! The Evil One possesses her — and Love could never rally if she heard that voice and heard those fearsome words. Until I know for sure I can have no sense of peace."

Luther shuffled his feet uneasily and twitched his cap over one eye.

"If Hannah comes prowling around this house," he asserted defiantly, "she'd best look out! I'll bring to bear upon her a sound of words as will make her flesh creep! I've got a lot in store for her and I expect she knows it — she was always fearful of a rounded oath!" But in spite of his bravado the old man looked uncomfortable. "'Twas I cursed her," he added as though to assure himself. "She can do naught to me."

"That's surely so," assented Seth, "but it's poor Love Babbitt that I'm fearful for — she's sorely stricken as it is, and no further harm must reach her. But then," he added, "maybe Hannah's safe down to Zaccheus Bailey's after all."

"Let her beware of *me!*" again ejaculated Luther, shaking an unsteady finger admonishingly at the stove. "Let her think twice before she comes in hearing distance o' the words I'll throw at her!

They'll scorch her evil soul and make the marrow of her bones to shrivel!"

"I have n't a doubt," remarked Seth, looking gravely down upon the untidy and huddled figure, "but you could scare the Evil One that's got her. As for Hannah Turner, she's a soul that's bound, and no power to struggle free. 'T would need a saint to shrive her, and there are none round here."

Seth picked up his hat and warmed his hands a moment by the stove. "I'd best be going now," he said; "I'll find a way to ease my mind about her. I had a deal to say when I came down here, but I see it must wait. I'm in no mood to talk."

As he was leaving the room Luther called him back. "Tell old Mrs. Niles she might come in and sit a spell and make a dish o' tea. Tell her the room's warm and she'll find it comfortable, — and, Seth, it might be any time you'd see 'em now, — the waning of the year is favorable for all such things, — and maybe you would find

'em kindly, — it's said they are to some and not to others."

When Seth walked up the road old Mrs. Niles had finished her gossip and was heading homewards. It was not according to his liking to accost her, but he did so. "Luther Skinner asks you kindly to go in and sit a spell and make a dish o' tea," he announced in his direct and serious way.

"Luther does?" exclaimed old Mrs. Niles doubtingly. "Why, what ails the man? — this ain't his way!"

"Maybe," assented Seth; "but that's his message — it might be that he hankers after company, and," he added, "'t would be a kindly act if your old man would look in and say 'good-evening' as he passes down the road — it might cheer Luther considerably."

Without waiting for an answer he passed on, and his long legs swung into an even stride as he walked back to the village. Seth's walk revealed his inner self more

than any other outward sign. In spite of all his awkward ways there was a certain rhythmic motion to his gait when he felt himself alone that showed a mind unfettered by the narrowing rounds of daily life and the cramping, circumscribed opinions of his neighbors. However poor the stage might be on which he acted out his life-rôle, there were no bounds to limit the free action of his soul, and this he realized, — and it was this consciousness of freedom that had given him a serene and deep content. But now a keen anxiety was sweeping through the portals of his heart, and turning all his inner calm to turmoil. His mind was tossed with questions to which he could not find an answer.

"Love is so cared for where she is," he murmured as he walked along. "She needs so much I could not give, and my old house is lonely for a woman, though to me it's all I want. I have no knowledge of the care of sick folks, — but I'd give my life for Love if it would help her; yet I know,

when all is said and done, she's better where she is."

He stopped to watch the busy actions of a downy woodpecker that was tapping up and down the trunk of an old gnarled apple tree, and then he went his way again.

"How could I ask Lucinda Tracy to change her comfortable home upon the village street for my poor broken-down old shanty? — yet Love could not exist without her care. But Love has longed to share my home — I see that now, fool dreamer that I've been; yet how could I suppose the thought would come to her — poor child?" The chill of twilight was creeping over the earth and Seth pulled his cap down over his ears and turned his collar up. He began to think aloud again: —

"Since it's so, there is no time to lose to put my life at her disposal; yet how will it result? Will she find the happiness she looks for, or will she pine for all she's given up? I wish I knew! I wish I could see clear!"

He strode along the road with his hands thrust far into his pockets; then he threw his head back with a sudden gesture as though to cast away a weight from off his shoulders.

"I will be guided right," he murmured, —"I'll keep that thought in mind."

Steadied by this assertion he quickened his pace still more.

When he came to Aunt Lucinda's house he hesitated for a moment, then crossed the road and knocked gently at the side door. It was opened almost immediately.

"How is she now?" he whispered.

Aunt Lucinda put her finger on her lips to warn him to speak softly.

"She's quieted down some," she answered. "I should n't wonder but she'd sleep before long. Parson Goodwin came again and I heard 'em talking. I guess he's helped her considerable — he's a good man and he's full of sorrow for her. When he came out I saw his eyes looked shiny as though he were trying to keep

tears back; I guess he's a good man and no mistake."

"Aunt Lucinda," said Seth gently, "if I might just look in and see her face, — I'd be quiet, I promise you, and I'm thinking no harm would come of it!"

Aunt Lucinda looked at him in silence for a moment, then she shook her head and closed the door softly.

With a heavy heart he walked away. As he was passing the last house on the village street in walking homewards Nathan Goodhue overtook him.

"Hi there, Seth, wait a minute," he called.

When he joined him Seth noticed that he was agitated.

"Is there aught that's wrong?" he asked.

"There is," assented Nathan, "only I can't be sure what it is. I've hitched my horse and sleigh down in Widow Haskell's barn and I'm thinking 't would be best to go there. I can't speak here right in the village street where, like as not, there

are folks peeking out the windows at us, and it's something I'd feel better you should know."

They went down to the barn and Nathan unhitched his horse and stood by its head.

"It's just this way," he began. "I can't say if it be fancy, but I'm willing to wager there's something wrong going on down to Zaccheus Bailey's and that Hannah Turner's loose somewhere. My reason's this. I was driving along the road when a big sled dragging baled hay come along and it took up so much room I had to pull up alongside the stone wall. As it passed I noticed something black crouching under one of the bales that hung over the side of the sled and its feet were on the runner it seemed. I did n't pay much heed at first. It was getting dark and I could n't see much and hold my horse steady at the same time; but what shook me all up to nothing was that I heard what sounded like a faint laugh

same as what we heard that night Hannah followed me. It was so faint I can't even say for sure I heard it, though I was positive of it at the time."

Nathan's face sagged as he recalled the incident. Seth looked at him attentively. On his own face was an expression of deep concern.

"Who was the driver?" he asked anxiously.

"He's a boy that drives for a lumberman that owns a mill in the next town. Folks say he's kind o' simple."

"He passes down by Zaccheus Bailey's, then?"

"He does, sure enough."

The two men looked at each other. The same thought was in their minds.

"We'd best go there and see Emmeline," remarked Seth laconically, — "and there's no time to waste."

He jumped into the sleigh and took the reins. Nathan clambered in after him and they started at a brisk pace in the direc-

tion of the town line. Occupied with the same anxiety they were silent, until Nathan began to unburden his mind: —

"I never liked Hannah Turner," he remarked gloomily, "yet look at the time spent on her! I bear her a grudge for it. Ever since that night when we took her to Zaccheus Bailey's I've spent more nights chasing nightmares than I'm ever likely to make up for!"

He drew his muffler over his ears and sank down into the seat in an attempt to get sheltered from the cold.

"It's for Emmeline's interest to keep Hannah where she is, so I can't for the life of me fathom how she could get loose," he continued in a complaining voice.

Seth's thoughts were wholly given over to the danger that might be threatening Love Babbitt should it be proved that Hannah was at large, and he hardly heard Nathan's grumbles that broke forth every now and then in dismal protest. As they approached the house, however, Nathan's

outlook seemed to undergo a complete change. He became abnormally alert and assumed a position that would enable him to leap out of the sleigh at a moment's notice should the occasion warrant it.

"Hannah might take a notion to perform one o' her jumping tricks and land on us as she did before; — 't were best to be wary," he explained.

There was a light in the back part of the house and after hitching the horse to the fence the two men went to the side door and knocked.

Zaccheus Bailey opened it.

"Who be you?" he asked.

Somehow they had not expected to see Zaccheus, and not knowing how much Emmeline had told him they were taken aback for a moment. Nathan was the first to recover himself and to speak out.

"We've come to see Emmeline Bailey," he said, coughing behind his hand to hide his perplexity. "She's got a sick relative."

"Say no more!" shouted Zaccheus, stamping both his feet. "This house ain't a Bedlam! I'll have no more 'sick relatives,' as you call 'em, landed here! If they're any more round, take 'em somewheres else"— and he closed the door violently.

Nathan turned and looked at Seth. "I don't blame him," he remarked, nodding his head pensively. "I'm willing to allow I'd feel that way myself — when all's said and done, a man could n't stand more than one like Hannah, — and some could n't manage that! He should have heard what I had to say, just the same."

Seth took the knocker in his hand and gave a resounding blow on the door.

"Zaccheus Bailey," he called aloud, "it's for your interest to know what we've come to tell. Open the door to us!"

There was a sound of moving about inside and then the door opened a little way and Emmeline put her head out.

"Is it Nathan Goodhue standing there?" she asked sharply.

"Nathan Goodhue and Seth Ware are right in front of your door, marm, and don't intend to leave until they've had a word with you. It's to your advantage to hear what they have it on their minds to say."

"Say what it is, then, quick, and have done with it."

Emmeline kept the door but a crack open as though she feared they would attempt to enter. Seth put his hand on Nathan's arm as a warning to keep quiet and he spoke in a grave and solemn tone.

"How comes it, Emmeline Bailey, that a demented woman under your charge, and a stepsister at that, manages to escape from the house and wander abroad to be a menace to innocent folks? The garret is on top of the house and well guarded by lock and key, — but one flight of stairs leads to it. It seems strange that such a thing could happen."

"Who's seen her?" blurted out Emmeline in a strident voice and taken off her guard.

"Ah! You admit that it's so, marm!"

cried Nathan excitedly. "You as much as say you have deliberately let her out — let a demented relative out loose upon an unsuspecting community, to jump upon their backs at will, claw their faces and screech out secrets that had best be kept unspoken! I know whereof I speak. I bear the marks yet. You're doing something against which the town'll rise, and if you don't look out they'll catch her for a witch, and you and Zaccheus will lose what little standing you've got. Folks don't favor witches' folks. Seth saw farther than I did, for I will say right here, I felt pretty positive I'd heard Hannah even if I was not so positive I'd seen her, but I thought maybe she'd escaped from the house somehow. I was n't figuring on her being let out so accommodatingly to roam around scaring the life out of innocent, law-abiding folks that like to sleep sound nights without having to leave one eye and ear open! We'd like you to explain, marm."

Nathan was working himself up into a state of violent and protesting indignation and would have continued at length had not Emmeline stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Stop, Nathan Goodhue, — some one might be round and hear you," she said hurriedly; "'t ain't my fault that she's got out. Come round to the other side o' the house and I'll tell you about it. You can't come in. Wait till I get my shawl."

They waited in silence.

Presently she appeared with a shawl over her head, and closed the door hurriedly behind her. "Come this way." They followed her to the back of the house. "Speak low," she cautioned them. "Zaccheus is in a bad mood. I've lost my grip on him — he's been so for a week or more. Hannah's got on his nerves."

"You can tell him, marm, that we've had her on our backs, which I claim is worse," expostulated Nathan.

"Hush! Hush, man! — You 'll start her

up to taking on if she hears you, — and Zaccheus will be ready to do 'most anything if she does. I can't hold him nowadays."

"Emmeline Bailey," remonstrated Seth, — "if it was Hannah that Nathan saw clinging to the sled, how can she be inside the house? It were best for you to deal honestly with us, — I give you warning!"

"How do you mean you give me warning?" she snapped out quickly. "What have you to do with it, anyway?"

"I have this to do with it" — Seth moved nearer to her and spoke very low. "Hannah's nearly killed Love Babbitt by putting a curse upon her. The poor girl is stricken low and we are sore troubled. Parson Goodwin is watching over her and doing his best, but if Hannah went to Lucinda Tracy's house and uttered her evil curse again, and Love heard her, it would be more than the girl could stand, and death would surely follow. If such a dread thing as that should happen

in this village, 't is hard to say what folks would stop at, — it would go hard with Hannah, — but it would go just as hard with you and Zaccheus, — I could n't answer for myself, and I reckon I could n't for others. I'm thinking it's as well to speak frank."

Emmeline's face grew pale, and she pulled her shawl more closely around her with a shiver. "I can't seem to hold Zaccheus," she said nervously, — "the trouble's there."

"How's that?"

"Well, I'd perhaps as well admit that Zaccheus has a failing, and it don't make him easy to get on with at best, but since Hannah came he's been something awful, and when she starts to let loose and he hears her up in the garret shrieking and howling, it seems as though he'd go mad himself. I took note that sometimes Hannah'd rave about the lake over yonder, and Zaccheus took note, too, of it, and he said to me one day, 'If Hannah got out, likely

as not she'd throw herself into the lake and we'd be rid of her.' I told him it was a terrible thing to say, but he kept on saying it, just the same, and one day he unlocked the garret door and Hannah leapt out. Zaccheus locked the door after her, and we thought we were well rid of her, but 't would almost seem as though she knew enough to plague us. She left the house towards sundown — we watched her go. About three o'clock the next morning we heard a moving sound up in the garret and suddenly 't was as though a fury was let loose there — the wailing-like of a cat went through the house! 'My God!' said Zaccheus to me, ''t is Hannah!' and he took to shivering and shaking. I can truly say the flesh on him shook as though 't were jelly, and you know the heft of him! We crept up the garret stairs and listened at the door and we heard her pacing the floor, so we knew 't was Hannah in the flesh; — at first Zaccheus got a notion that she'd

done the deed and 't was her spirit walking. The question that troubled us was how she'd got up there. The next time Zaccheus let her out, I kept watch at the window far into the night, and I suppose I kind o' dozed off, for I woke up sudden and saw a black figure climb up the porch same as a cat would, and from there she got her foot on the old wisteria vine and reached the beam you see sticking out from the house. From there she got at the vine higher up until she reached the garret window. The lock was broke and she slid the window up and climbed in. I declare I could n't hardly believe my senses, but I leaned 'way out of my window and seen her, and it's the truth I'm telling you, and I'm willing to swear it."

"You need n't do it, marm," intercepted Nathan reassuringly; "we are willing to believe it without. We can testify that Hannah can climb!"

"Well! Zaccheus he took on something terrible when I told him what I'd seen,"

continued Emmeline. "'It's more than evident that Hannah's spiting me,' he said — 'and she's full o' the Evil One. I swear by the Devil himself that I'll rid my house of her — be she your relative or not!' And he ran up the garret stairs and put his head in at the door, and he cursed and swore at her so's I thought they'd hear him for miles around. But Hannah she threw her arms straight up in the air and came towards him wiggling her long fingers at him, and 't was more than he could stand; — he slammed the door and he come running down the stairs as fast as ever he could, and he never stopped until he reached the kitchen and there he gave way to his failing, and he kept at the bottle until he'd lost all sense o' things."

Nathan smothered a groan. Emmeline's tale brought back vivid memories of his own terror.

" 'T was Zaccheus let her out again despite all I could say — for I know well enough what folks'll say if they find out

she's gone demented; but I can't manage him — he's got beyond me; he's only got one thought and that's to get rid of her and she's sensed it, and that's why she comes back and don't go and drown herself in the lake. Zaccheus put an iron bar with a lock on it across the window so's she could n't get back, but I was n't going to have folks seeing her and telling lies again about the will, so I slipped upstairs when he did n't see and unlocked the bar and pushed it back. — That's why she's up there now. I saw her come."

Presently Seth spoke: "As I understand it, then, Emmeline Bailey, Zaccheus is likely to turn Hannah out whenever she comes back, and the Evil Spirit in her will roam about doing all the mischief it can. Is this the truth?"

"I guess you've about said it," assented Emmeline tartly, and glancing uneasily up at the house.

"Well, I will speak with him."

Seth started towards the door when

Emmeline leapt forward and stood in his way.

"You've no right to force yourself in where you're not wanted," she whispered excitedly, holding her hands out as though to keep him from advancing nearer.

At that moment a heavy thump came against the door from the inside, and then a sound as though chairs were being flung about the room on the left of the door.

"That's Zaccheus," said Emmeline hastily. "He's failing again and is working towards the summit. He'll be worse before he's better. There's no good speaking to him now, and, anyway, I'll not let you in — you're not welcome."

Seth stepped back and paused. "I force no man's door," he said, "but I'll leave this message for Zaccheus Bailey. You tell him from me that next time Hannah Turner leaves this house a posse 'll come from the village and make short work of him, and as for you, Emmeline

Bailey, in such an event you'd best go hide yourself somewhere, for though you be a woman there's no telling what a band of angry men'll do. Should aught happen to Love Babbitt they would n't be too gentle."

At this point Nathan began to tug at Seth's sleeve.

"Come on, Seth," he entreated excitedly. "I see something kind o' going on up top there. I can't see what it is, but I guess there's no doubt but what it's Hannah, and she might like as not take a flying leap at us! We'd best get away from here!"

"I'll go in and hold her back," whispered Emmeline hastily. Then she turned to Seth. "Is this a warning sent by others —or is it your own warning, Seth Ware?"

"It's my own warning," he answered gravely. Then, as a distinct rattling came from the garret window, responding to a sudden impulse, he lifted up his voice.

"Listen to me, Hannah Turner!" he

cried, and the sound rang loud in the gathering night. " 'T were better for you had you never been born! You have blighted the days of a helpless, innocent woman and turned her peace to sorrow. Keep where you are or the wrath of man will destroy you!"

The silence that followed seemed to pulsate with suppressed emotion. Emmeline quickly turned the handle of the door and slipped in, closing it softly behind her. Not a sound came from the room on the left.

Nathan gasped as if he had been holding his breath and could retain it no longer.

"Come quick before she curses us!" he implored, dragging Seth away. "You've defied the Evil One, man! Whatever did you do it for?"

Seth shook him off and went and unhitched the horse. The creature was trembling from the cold. They got into the sleigh and were just starting when

they heard a loud cry, and a light appeared in the garret window. They could see that the iron bar was thrown back and the window was open. The figures of two women could be seen struggling together. One of them was Emmeline clutching at Hannah, who was endeavoring to prevent her from adjusting the bar that made her a prisoner. For a moment Hannah let go her hold and putting her hands to her mouth she screamed at them. "The cord — the cord!" she cried with a wild laugh, — "the cord will snap asunder and the tongue will split!"

The words cut the air like a knife.

In that moment of freedom Emmeline pulled down the iron bar and locked it. They saw her figure stoop forward as she did it — then the light went out.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE'S PLEDGE

GLEAMS of winter sunshine were filtering in through the window panes of the room in which Love was sitting. Her chair was pushed a little farther back than usual, for the cold was severe outside and penetrated every vulnerable crack and cranny in the little cottage. The pots of gay geranium plants, placed in a row where the sunlight could strike them, held up their red and pink blossoms in defiance of the icy wind without that was blowing from the northwest.

Aunt Lucinda was pouring warm water over them and washing the leaves. Every now and then she glanced at Love, and for fear of betraying her anxiety she kept up a stream of irrelevant remarks: —

"Seems as though every kind of insect

critter had managed to hide itself inside these pots! I do declare it beats all the things that'll come scrambling up to the surface when I pour this hot water on! You should have seen the pesky earthworm that popped his head out o' that pot there!" The busy, nimble fingers stirred the earth and snipped the leaves and brushed the dust away, and all the while the anxious, steadfast heart was reaching out yearningly to know what the silent figure in the chair was dreaming of. For Love's eyes were looking off to distances where Aunt Lucinda's could not follow, and the consciousness of this disquieted her. It seemed to her as if a strange and sudden calm had enveloped Love's soul, that had been so turbulent and storm-swept. Her woman's intuitive instinct, quickened by long years of fostering care, felt a sense of change, but could not fathom it.

Presently Love spoke — as though she had not heard her chattering: —

Aunt Lucinda stopped with her Scissors in the Air and looked at Love

"I'm thinking Parson Goodwin's got a warmer heart than most," she said. "He's, oh, so different now from what he was. He's left off telling me to think on death the way he used to do. His talk is all of life. He's mindful of the change himself."

"Well, that sounds good to me, I'm bound to say," exclaimed Aunt Lucinda, with a great show of cheerfulness, while she snipped off the dead leaves and put them neatly in a basket. "I have no notion of judging what the clergy say, — they're supposed to know what they're talking about, — but when folks are alive it looks to me more sensible to dwell on life than on death. One thing at a time, say I."

"But, Aunt Lucinda, Parson Goodwin talks of life eternal. He tells me I've been thinking of life as though 't was something we had only just for now, instead of keeping it in mind that this is what is called 'the vale o' tears' and after this will come a great awakening. And then he says we

shall see clear, — and see how those we love belong to us in spirit if we feel alike and love alike and believe alike. I seem to see it all so plain, now he's explained it!"

Aunt Lucinda stopped short with her scissors in the air and looked at Love. Then she went and sat down on the stool in front of her.

"I knew Parson Goodwin would somehow explain things if you'd give him a chance," she remarked with a note of triumph in her voice, — "he's a learned man and he'd ought to know, — and it's a mercy you can follow what he says, Love, for, I might as well say here, I'm not made to, — I never could make head or tail o' such things, — and more's the shame to me!"

"And yet you're so good, Aunt Lucinda, and so kind, and thoughtful of others!"

Aunt Lucinda's little wrinkled face flushed at the praise.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed, "I like to see things shipshape — that's all. What more did he say, Love? I might make a try at following."

"He told me that life and love were immortal — and that real love could not die. He said when folks thought they loved some one, they could test their love by thinking of all they'd be willing to give up for them and they'd soon find whether 't was the real thing or not. He said some folks thought they loved when they saw a pretty face or a fine outward appearance, but that was n't love at all and would n't last; but that real love — the kind that lived forever — meant mutual understanding and sympathy and a kind o' communion o' thought. Oh, 't was beautiful to hear him!"

"I sensed he was a good man," remarked Aunt Lucinda gently, "and from what you say I guess I was right."

Both were silent for a while; then Love said quietly: "I told him about the bell—"

"What about the bell, Love?"

"I told him how strange I felt sometimes when I listened to Seth ringing it. I might be feeling miserable, — full o' suffering sometimes and discouraged-like, — and when I listened to the pealing something seemed to lift me up where I could see things different; and all my pains would go and 't was as though something in me had floated away from my body to another sphere where I no longer had this body, but one that was full of health and joy. Oh, Aunt Lucinda, seems as though I could n't tell it so's any one can understand. I can't understand it myself — there don't seem to be words to fit it!"

Aunt Lucinda's face was puckered into an expression of pitiful confusion. She spoke up, however, with her usual frankness.

"Some folks like one thing and some another, I'm bound to believe," she said, "but for myself I'm set on feeling my feet pretty solid on the ground. In the long

run it seems more natural according to my way of thinking." And she fidgeted upon the stool in evident perplexity and distress.

Love did not notice her, but went on speaking her thoughts aloud: —

"I don't know what it was that came and spoiled it all, but there was something of a sudden came between me and the bell just as though it was a great black cloud, and I began to think of no one but myself and of my being crippled and not like others; and then Jennie came and her Elisha Green, and Lucy and Trueman Shattuck, and they seemed to have everything and I nothing, and I felt as though I'd lost that something that used to float away and feel such joy when I listened to the bell, — and everything around me nearly broke my heart!"

"I know it, dearie, — I know you've suffered more than tongue can tell," said Aunt Lucinda, going to the side of Love's chair and putting a tender hand upon her

head, and gently tucking in the shawl around her limbs. She was wondering whether Love recalled the night when the terrible voice outside rent the air so piercingly, and whether she associated that occurrence with the loss she spoke of.

"Parson Goodwin's given me a little prayer to say whenever I feel that black cloud coming down on me," she continued musingly, — "he says it will protect me from all that is unholy if I utter it with faith. At first, it seemed as though I could n't, and as if something fought to keep me from the comfort of it, — but I fought back just as hard as ever I could fight, and now I kind o' feel as though I'd broken through whatever was between me and the pealing o' the bell."

"There!" exclaimed Aunt Lucinda, "I knew he'd manage somehow! I knew if he'd put his mind to it, he'd know what to do. I've said so all along. I reckon now, Love, you'll get better, and we'll all be same as we were before!" And

the valiant little woman braced herself to speak with confidence, and simulating a sudden spurt of cheerful energy she attacked the gay geranium plants again.

Presently she stopped short and looked out of the window: "If there is n't Nathan Goodhue talking to Widow Haskell over yonder. Looks as though they had some news. They are talking like mill-clappers, I declare they are!" And she stood behind the curtain and peered out at them.

After a few moments she went to the kitchen and, taking down a shawl that hung on a peg behind the door, she put it hastily over her head and shoulders.

"I'm going to see what's the matter," she explained to Love, — "it's clear there's something, — I won't be a minute, but it looks to me as though there was something out o' the common they'd got hold of." And she opened the door and made her way across the ice-covered road to where the two neighbors were in close conversation.

"I guess you've got something to talk about," she volunteered as she drew near them. "I seen you and Nathan with your heads together like a couple o' barnyard fowl talking these ten minutes or more. Seems as though I'd got to come to find out what news you'd got hold of."

They turned and looked at her.

"Minervy 's had a letter come by the mail coach from Jennie," vouchsafed Widow Haskell with ill-suppressed excitement — "she wants to come back!"

"How do you mean 'wants to come back'?" exclaimed Aunt Lucinda; "sakes alive, she's *just gone!*"

"She don't like Elisha!" volunteered Nathan in an awed and confidential whisper.

They all three looked at each other aghast.

"*Don't like Elisha!* Why, she's only just got him!" almost shouted Aunt Lucinda when she had partially recovered from the shock of the news. "Why, she was only

married four days ago, and Minervy's not more than got cleaned up from the wedding? What's the girl thinking of?"

"She says he's just horrid," explained Widow Haskell.

"She says no one can ever make her live with him and it's no use talking," added Nathan.

Again they all looked at each other in consternation.

"Whoever asked her to have him, anyway?" cried Aunt Lucinda after a pause. "She made her own choice and came down on Minervy as highty-tighty as you please without so much as asking, and gets her to have the wedding fixed up. Did n't we spend all Christmas Day making pies, I'd like to know? If she don't like him, she'll have to lump it now — the knot is tied."

"The worst of it is, Jennie's headstrong and you can't tell what she'll do," remarked Widow Haskell, "I'm willing to say he would n't ha' been my choice," she added as an afterthought.

"No matter what you think of him!" retorted Aunt Lucinda; "that's neither here nor there. We can't have such flighty folks coming 'round here landing weddings on us and then trying to wheedle back 'cause they don't find they're suited — it's shameful!" In high dudgeon she pulled her shawl more closely about her and turned as though to go back to the house, but she stopped to hear what Nathan was saying.

"It appears when the stage-coach they went off in got as far as Concord, Elisha took advantage of the stop to go into the tavern, and he must have refreshed himself considerably in there, for when he came back and took his seat next to Jennie he trod all over her and stepped on her toes. She had new slippers on for the journey and he hurt her and she began to cry. That made him cross, and he spoke sharp and ugly, and from what I gathered from Minervy he could n't set up straight in his seat, and the folks in the coach were

scandalized and wanted to put him off. Jennie most died o' shame, poor girl. I guess he's been one of those wild kind o' young fellers that don't take kindly to settling down; — but then she's married him — she'll have to take the chances!"

"When he came down the aisle with Jennie on his arm his eyes were turning in towards his nose — it gave him an awful queer look," remarked Widow Haskell, recalling the scene. "I suspicioned then things were wrong with him, and I guess I was about right."

"It's a bad start to get your toes trodden on," asserted Aunt Lucinda decidedly, — "there's nothing would turn me quicker than that, I'll venture to say, though I'm not one to approve of turning tail when you've done a thing. She'll have to see it through now."

"Minervy's all broke up," continued Widow Haskell. "She says she laid herself out to give her a good wedding, and no sooner has she got the floor swept up

and the china put back in the corner cupboard than Jennie up and writes she don't like Elisha, and wants to come back! Folks always did come down on Minervy. It's kind o' too bad!"

"You recollect, Nathan," burst out Aunt Lucinda suddenly, "you said his knees knocked some. Well, I remember my Grandmother Daby used to say setting store by any man whose knees knocked was a waste of time. Your saying what you did about Elisha Green made me think of it. What are you laughing at now, for pity's sake?"

Nathan was emitting strange noises behind his collar that could be recognized as a chuckle. "I'm thinking of Minervy's flow o' tears and the way Parson Goodwin scowled at her. Maybe she'd have put 'em off till now if she'd known what was coming."

"I think you act shameful about Minervy, Nathan Goodhue," remonstrated Widow Haskell. "Some folks get satis-

faction one way and some another. 'T ain't for you men to go poking fun at Minervy 'cause she gives way easy — it don't hurt you any. There goes Seth Ware over to your house Lucinda — something must be the matter — he's got his Sabbath-day suit on. Maybe some one's dead!"

Aunt Lucinda turned quickly, in time to see Seth going in at the front door. "I guess I must be going back," she said, hiding the sudden throb of apprehension that shot through her, and she left them hurriedly while the two friends stood watching her until she was inside the house.

Seth had passed a wakeful night in his old house by the pine grove. He sat long in his well-worn chair by the fireside smoking his pipe and thinking deeply. Once he lit his candle and made a tour through the deserted rooms upstairs. Dust was everywhere, and now and then when he opened a door a frightened rat scampered behind the wainscotting. He tried to look

about him with the eyes of a stranger, but he could not manage it, — the old place was too familiar to him, — he could have walked through the rooms blindfolded. He seemed to see his mother everywhere. In the room she once had occupied her apron lay upon a chair. He went and touched it gently as though by so doing he could bring her spirit back to him, but he did not lift it from the place where it had lain so long, he could not bring himself to change the aspect of the room which had been left exactly as it was the day her body was removed and taken to its final resting-place. "A house of memories," he murmured as he groped his way down the stairs and back to his chair by the hearthstone. "It surely is no sort of a home for Love — poor girl," he added; "and yet it's all I have to offer."

When morning came his mind had cleared on many points, and he went about his work as usual,—chopped his wood and fed the horse and did the necessary chores,

— and after he had cooked his midday meal and eaten it, he cleared his plate away and dressed himself in his Sabbath-day suit and started for the village. When he reached the road he paused and looked back at the house — the only home he had ever known. It stood there by the pine grove, a gray, gaunt relic of the past, — ghostly and forlorn, and settling sideways on its old foundations.

Then he turned and swung with measured strides up the road, piled high with snowbanks, to the village.

His eyes lighted when he caught sight of the belfry where his bell hung, as though he greeted a close and well-loved friend. "I wish 't were time to ring it now," he murmured; "I reckon it would ease me some."

The sight of Aunt Lucinda gossiping with Nathan and Widow Haskell disturbed him a little, but without retarding his steps he went to the cottage door and knocked, then turned the handle and

walked in. His heart was beating fast as he looked in at the sitting-room door. He had not seen Love Babbitt since her complete collapse, and a wave of tenderness for her swept over him, like the waves of the mighty ocean that swell and surge towards the land, and his eyes searched for the delicate form stretched in the familiar chair.

She did not hear him enter and he looked upon her face with adoration, struck speechless by its marble beauty; holding his breath in a sort of ecstasy at being able thus to gaze upon her unawares. It seemed to him as though he caught a vision of the whiteness of her soul. For Love's face had undergone a change. Sweet and flower-like it was before, but now a new expression dwelt upon it far transcending what had been there hitherto. Only those who pass through the fire and agony of renunciation can have that look.

"I proved thee also through the waters of strife." The words of the Scriptures

flashed through Seth's mind as he watched her and saw the strengthened outline and the calm that had followed the storm, and that now wrapt her in its luminous folds. Treading very softly he reached her chair.

"Love," he whispered in a trembling voice.

A radiant smile brought her face back to life.

"I have been waiting for you, Seth," she answered, holding her two hands out to him, — "I have so much to say!"

"Let me speak first, Love."

He stooped and kissed the little hands and covered them with his big one, and sitting on the wooden stool that was close to her chair he began: —

"I have no gift for speaking out my thoughts," he said, "and for what I want to say I find no words to give my meaning" — his face grew very pale and he spoke in a low voice that was none too steady.

"Love, would you be happier if Parson

Goodwin named us man and wife and I took you to my home? You know my love and adoration of you, Love, and how my thoughts are yours through day and night, and through the months and through the years, and so 't will be through all eternity. I have no knowledge of what a woman likes. My home is just a lone man's house with nothing in it to give cheer or comfort — for I'm poor as far as money goes, though for myself I feel no need of things that most folks strive for. I have the riches of the sunrise and the sunset, — of the songs of forest birds, — of the wondrous changes of the seasons, — these things I count as treasures and I've never asked for more. But now I reckon that a woman must feel different, — I hardly know, — but just the same, Love, I offer you what's mine to do with as you want. It's just for you to say."

For a moment Love looked half bewildered; her head sank lower on her cushions and her pale lips trembled.

Then she recovered herself.

"How strange," she said, "that what I've longed for so should come, and I refuse it! But I've learned better, Seth, through bitter sorrow. It seems as though I'd been possessed and lost my reason! But I'd best speak out and say the truth, — I've longed with all my heart for life upon this earth as others have it, and I've learned it can't be, Seth, through harsh experience. Something came over me that made me look at things all wrong. I know 't would be a sin for me to marry any man. I'd be a heavy burden for your back to carry, and I could n't bear it, Seth, if I should see your face grow weary. But I love you better than my life. I want to tell you, so you'll know for sure."

He gazed into her face in rapture, holding her hands against his breast.

"Love," he said, "I'm thinking that for you and me, despite all hardships, love can be a wondrous thing if we'll just let it take its course and well up from the heart.

I have no leaning for the feeling folks call love, that comes to-day and is gone to-morrow. I can sense nothing real there and it wakens nothing in me. What I dream of is that you should give to me what I am giving you, — the very best I know, — the very best I am, and all I hope to be."

"I do," she whispered, drawing away one hand and putting it against his cheek. "I love you same as you love me, Seth."

Then, all unconscious of himself, Seth knelt beside her and drew the delicate head towards him and kissed her forehead reverently. She was his saint, — his glorified ideal, — 't was thus he wanted her to be.

She looked so frail! He gazed upon her and with a throb of anguish his reason told him that he could not hold her there for very long. But in his solitary life Seth had pondered long on many things beyond the world's short vision. The dark partition separating Life and Death seemed very thin to him. His faith was firm that when

the allotted time should come when Love would pass from this world to the next, she would be released from earthly limitations and would be free to come back to him in spirit and commune with him. He longed to speak of this to her — to make it sure that both would feel alike so that he might recall it afterwards.

As though she read his thoughts Love spoke: —

"Some day I shall be passing on, Seth," she said, "and it's a poor misshapen body that I'll leave behind, and Parson Goodwin's told me that he feels for sure that when the time comes for me to go 't will seem as though I were a prisoner set free, from whom the heavy chains have fallen. He says I shall feel full of strength and full of life. 'T will be a wondrous feeling, Seth, to one like me! — and Parson Goodwin is a learned man — he'd ought to know."

"Surely," Seth answered quietly, — "he'd ought to know, Love."

"And I've been thinking that there'll

be times when I'll seem near to you, because I kind o' feel you sense things more than most, — I've always had that feeling about you, Seth; it's strange, and I can't tell why, — but since I've talked so much with Parson Goodwin I begin to understand it more."

Love paused a moment and then looking earnestly into his face she added: —

"When you ring the evening bell from yonder belfry, Seth, it's then that I will come to you. I reckon I would hear its silver tones across the ocean of Eternity. I could not get so far away but I would hear it, Seth, and I'm thinking then I'll know its language, and all your heart pours out I'll understand, and we'll be one in heart and soul for good and all."

As Love finished speaking, she raised herself and clasped her hands around his neck, and in the fulness of his deep emotion Seth drew her to his heart and held her there.

"For good and all, — so be it, Love,"

he said with solemn emphasis upon each word. "'T is thus we plight our troth."

Later on Aunt Lucinda tiptoed to the door and opened it gently. The silence within caused her to feel a sudden quake of fear, and as she held the door ajar she put her head through the aperture and looked in. There sat Love with her head upon her pillows, her hands clasped in Seth's who knelt beside her. Motionless as statues, they looked as though the beating of life's pendulum had stopped. But on their faces was reflected "the Light that never shone on land or sea!"

Covering her eyes Aunt Lucinda closed the door and went into her kitchen. There she sat down in her Grandmother Daby's chair and, bowing her head, she wept softly.

CHAPTER IX

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

IT was the last day of the old year. Business at the grocery store had begun early, and though it was now past noon the coming and going had kept Harvey Shattuck constantly busy since the opening hour.

Mrs. Jennings, the butcher's wife, had just gathered up her purchases and had put them into a basket which she had brought with her for the purpose, when Nathan Goodhue came into the store.

Nathan could never pass the grocery store without dropping in there to hear the latest bit of village gossip and toast him-

self by the stove. There was a potent attraction about the place that was not to be resisted. The pungent smell of herbs, of coffee and green tea, the open boxes filled with dried beans and peas, and the keg of dried sliced apples for pies, the big jar of pickled limes that stood behind the counter, the glass jars filled with sticks of barley candy and hoarhound lozenges, the motley collection of brooms, shovels, rat-traps, wicker baskets, etc., that filled the corners, — all these things seemed to lend a charm to the place and an added flavor to the bits of news that were brought in by the customers. If any man in the village had half an hour of leisure on his hands he was sure to say casually, "I guess I'll step over to the store," and there he was sure to meet kindred spirits drawn there by the same subtle attraction.

On this particular day, as Nathan was passing by in his pung, as usual he yielded to the temptation, and stopping short he hitched his horse to a post and came in,

causing the bell on the door to tinkle loudly.

"Good-morning," he said in his cheery way, with much puffing and blowing, — "fine winter weather!" — and he drew his mittens off and warmed his hands at the stove. "Any news up this way?"

"Don't seem much to have happened overnight!" answered Mrs. Jennings. "Minervy Wade's taking on some, she's so scared lest Jennie comes on the stage-coach, but I tell her I guess she need n't worry — Jennie's no fool, though she's headstrong. Apart from that I don't seem to know of anything, except old Mrs. Niles is considerably worn out looking after Luther Skinner."

"What ails Luther?" asked Nathan, blowing on his fingers and then holding them as near the warmth of the stove as possible.

"Don't ask me," she replied, — "I guess no one knows what ails him. I never heard of any one being took so queer. Old

Mrs. Niles says it's enough to make one's flesh creep to hear him!"

"Luther's getting on, and I guess he's kind o' notional," remarked Harvey Shattuck, tying up a bag of beans behind the counter. "I reckon he feels bad over Hannah leaving him and it makes him crusty."

"What does he do to make old Mrs. Niles's flesh creep?" asked Nathan with some show of curiosity.

"Well, — from what I gather, it seems Luther took a fancy he don't want to be left alone. He did n't use to mind it, but it seems he don't like it now. He acts as though some one he was n't partial to was trying to get in to see him and he was against seeing 'em. Old Mrs. Niles says he acts something terrible when he hears any one coming. She sent John in the other day to see to his stove and Luther had no knowledge of his coming, — and first thing John knew Luther was shouting at the top of his lungs: 'Don't you dare come near me! 'T was *I* cursed *you!* —

you've no business round this house or you'll get cursed again worse than before! I'll throw some oaths at you that you won't forget, I tell you!' John he did n't know how to take it, and got kind o' vexed, seeing as he was n't so mighty anxious to go tending to Luther's stove, anyway, so he walked into the room kind o' brisk and Luther pitched a piece o' kindling wood at him that hit him plumb on the chin. That was more'n John was bargaining for, and he got mad and he up and shouted himself: 'Shut up there, Luther Skinner! What ails you, anyway?' Luther, seeing who 't was, calmed right down and looked awful foolish. 'If I'd known 't was you, John, I would n't have troubled to give warning — you should ha' made yourself known when you came in the door.' That's all he'd say. Old Mrs. Niles had a like experience. It comes hard on those that look after him."

"I guess it don't come easy to find folks to keep him company," suggested Harvey

Shattuck, who had come around from behind the counter so as not to lose a word of what was being said.

"Well, as far as that goes you know how 't is," answered Mrs. Jennings. "Folks 'll put up with a lot if they get it on their minds that a body 's got no one to look after 'em. You can't help being sorry for Luther, — Hannah leaving him and all, — but he certainly acts strange!"

Nathan had been listening attentively while he warmed his hands. Then he pulled his mittens on and put up his coat-collar, for Mrs. Jennings had taken up her basket and was going out the door.

"I'll be getting along, I guess," he remarked, nodding to Harvey Shattuck, — "I just dropped in to get warm. There'll be an early ice-crop if this weather holds on, I'm thinking." And he drew the door to and went to unhitch his horse, then he took his seat in the pung.

Instead of proceeding in the direction in which he had been going, he turned his

horse's head and went down to Luther's house. He could hardly have explained why he did this, but the truth was Nathan had a streak of curiosity in him that was highly developed, and being near at hand he thought he would see for himself just how Luther behaved.

There was a post by the gate to which he tied his horse, and with difficulty because of his weight he made his way over the icy path to the back door. There he tapped, and lifting the latch, walked in.

"Who's there?" shouted a rasping, wheezy voice. "Don't any one come nosing round here that ain't welcome," it continued, growing more and more high-pitched and piercing. "I'll have no womenfolk prowling round my premises, and if it's the one I cursed, let her beware! — Don't let her show herself or she'll rue the day! — Get out while there's still time!"

Luther was evidently in a condition of extreme nervousness and excitement, and when Nathan entered the door of the room

from whence the voice came holding both elbows up crosswise so as to ward off unexpected missiles, he was terrified at the old man's appearance. Sitting forward in his chair with both crutches held aloft as though ready to hurl them at the intruder, Luther looked like an enraged parrot, — his nose, which seemed to have become beaklike, and his eyes, which protruded, made this simile strikingly realistic and produced an agitating effect upon Nathan whose imagination was easily worked upon.

"Hold on, Luther Skinner!" he cried out, — "don't you go taking on like that, — you'd frighten the Angel Gabriel if he was to come in here and see you mouthing there with your eyes popping out o' your head! You'll be tempting the Evil One to come and take a look at you if you don't look out!"

Luther sank back in his chair and his crutches fell with a clattering noise to the floor.

"I was n't looking for you, Nathan Goodhue," he muttered, his jaws shaking with agitation. "What brought you here?"

"I come here to wish you well and ask about your rheumatiz," replied Nathan, collecting himself and sitting down with assumed composure.

"You ain't looking as handsome as you might, Luther, — maybe you don't get your victuals regular. I presume you miss Hannah."

Luther cast a suspicious glance at his visitor — "Hannah's nothing to me," he snapped out laconically.

Now, Nathan had taken note of what Luther had shouted out before he entered the room and decided to use this as a means of drawing him out.

"Looks to me," he said, fastening his eye upon him, "as though Hannah had been the one you cursed. You shouted out loud enough for any one to hear that you'd cursed some one, and I guess 't was Hannah."

"Hush, man! I should n't ha' said it so's you could hear!" whispered Luther, putting his long bony finger to his lips by way of warning — "I'm kind o' fussed up about things and I guess likely I say more'n I mean to."

"Just the same, I guess 't was Hannah you cursed," persisted Nathan, refusing to be turned from the subject.

"And it don't matter, Luther," he added, bending towards the old man and speaking very low, "for 't was I who helped Seth take her to Zaccheus Bailey's house, and I know how you feel, 'cause I myself feel all het up lest she escape."

"Hush! Hush! Speak lower still!" whispered Luther excitedly. "I'm glad you come, Nathan, as long as you know as much as you do, for 't were well some one besides Seth should keep a lookout. The Evil One is in her! 'T was *I* cursed *her*," he added hastily; "she can do naught to me, — but there's no knowing what she might do to you."

Nathan resented this somehow. "You are mighty scared, it appears to me, for one who feels so safe!" he retorted with some show of irritability.

"Don't get crusty, Nathan, — 't will not alter things," retorted the old man impatiently. "I know Hannah, and I know she'll do all the harm she can, — there'll be no stopping her unless you keep a watch."

In spite of his boastful assertion there was a note of appeal in the old man's voice.

Nathan's heart was a big one and this was not lost upon him. He glanced at Luther's face with a sudden feeling of pity for his lonely condition. The picture Luther presented made him catch his breath, however. "For pity's sake, Luther Skinner," he said quickly, "put that old red cap on your head straight — it looks something terrible cocked over one eye. It gives me the creeps — 't would anybody!"

Luther ignored the remark, and went

on speaking hardly above a whisper — "The year goes out to-night," he said slowly — "mind what I say, Nathan, — the year goes out to-night. 'T would do no harm if you kept somewheres near the church. Seth'll be alone there ringing the bell, — it ain't always a comfortable feeling for a bell-ringer when every one's abed and asleep to ring the old year out."

Nathan felt a chill go down his back. "How's that?" he asked, anxious to see if Luther could be drawn into being more explicit.

The latter looked at him sharply from under his eyebrows. "Oh, well," he replied evasively, "a man gets kind o' notional being alone and folks all locked up in their houses asleep. Cats and bats are liable to come swooping round scaring the life out o' one. I thought, seeing as you think considerable of Seth, you might sit up for one night in the year and be somewhere so's you could be company to him if 't were so's he wanted you."

"Holy 'Zekiel, man! I'd as soon think of standing on my head, and that would be an uncommon act for one of my heft, as to go near Seth when he's ringing the bell! 'T would be putting myself where I was n't welcome. I've no notion of putting him out in such fashion!" And Nathan's face became flushed and uneasy. He remembered how Seth had been forced to explain Hannah's words to him about spirits walking, and much as he thought of him he quailed at the suggestion of subjecting himself to any such test.

Luther, who had been watching him, suddenly became submerged in his own thoughts and seemed to retire within himself. A feeling of constraint seemed to have arisen between them. Nathan saw that the old man would say no more, and it was with a certain feeling of embarrassment that he got up to go as though he was conscious of knowing something that he had no business to and was trying to hide it. Luther had sunk back into

his chair and his attention was riveted upon the stove.

"Well," exclaimed Nathan with a great show of cheerfulness, — "I'm glad to see you're pegging along as well as you be. I'll get round soon again, I dare say," and he shook himself and put his muffler over his ears preparatory to leaving. He turned to look at Luther as he left the room, but there was no response. The latter sat by the stove with his eyes closed, apparently oblivious of him.

As Nathan drove up the road in his pung an uncomfortable feeling took hold of him that a duty little to his liking had been put upon him. He wished now that he had not seen Luther. He argued with himself that it was a ridiculous suggestion on the part of a doddering old man that he should stay out of his comfortable bed on a winter's night and hang around the vicinity of a church for fear of Seth's getting scared!

"Whoever heard o' such a thing?"

he muttered: — "and that old scallawag talking about cats and bats and such things — I take no heed of such talk!"

But Luther's words oppressed him. Away down in his heart Nathan's friendship for Seth was very real. He could not understand him any more than the rest of the village could, but he was always impressed with the squareness and the honesty and integrity of this man whom they shrugged their shoulders at as one who was a recluse and a dreamer, and these qualities found a ready response from the downright truthfulness of his own more expansive nature. There was also a certain reserve force about Seth which he himself lacked and which he could not but admire, and the thought of failing him in an hour of need was one that he spurned as unworthy. Still, Nathan counted much on his creature comforts. He liked and looked forward to his hot supper and the luxury of a sound night's sleep afterwards, and he

kept up a continuous protest at Luther's untoward suggestion as he drove along the road in his pung.

"It's all very well for those that like midnight rambles with the thermometer around the zero point and the ground covered with snow," he complained. "Seth's bell-ringer and it's for him to ring his bell at the appointed times, come what may. 'T ain't for other folks to stay up and help him do it!"

In the meantime Seth, unconscious of Luther's fears for him, was preparing himself for the ringing out of the old year and ushering in the new. He had looked forward eagerly to this solemn duty as bell-ringer, for to him, who was wont to enter deeply into the hidden meaning of every simple act, this symbolic ceremony, for as such he deemed it, was one that must kindle a desire in all who listened to the bell to leave behind with the dying year all that was unworthy, and to enter the new with clearer vision.

He had given much thought on how to convey this message through the ringing of his bell, and during the morning while he was sawing wood he had pondered at length upon it. After a while one idea after another came to him until he had planned definitely just how to attempt to produce the desired effect. So absorbed was he in this that he had not given a thought to the tales which he had heard from Luther Skinner. The artist's soul within him was eager to produce the results it dreamed of, and everything apart from this seemed unimportant. But woven into it and through and through it, like a golden thread, was his love for the crippled girl whose image was enshrined in his heart with a clearness that could never be dimmed.

As the day waned, he turned his steps toward the village. The sun was low on the horizon and the sky was cloudless and luminous. The tracery of the leafless trees stood out against slanting rays of

amber, as though pencilled by Nature's magic hand. He drank in the beauty of it with a deep content, and throwing back his shoulders he drew the crisp air up through his nostrils and into his lungs and felt his steps grow light with the life it seemed to impart to him.

Aunt Lucinda saw him coming. "Here comes Seth," she said.

Love clasped her hands and held them against her breast as if to still the beating of her heart. With her soft hair framing her delicate white face she looked strangely ethereal as she lay with her head thrown back upon the cushions in the deepening shadows of the little sitting-room. In glancing at her with ever-watchful eyes Aunt Lucinda noticed the throbbing of the muscles of her throat under the gauzy kerchief that partially covered it. She quickly sought to relieve the suppressed excitement.

"Like as not he'll stay to supper," she remarked, "and we can have a good gos-

sip, and I'll tell you all about Jennie and Elisha."

"What about Jennie?" asked Love with sudden eagerness.

"Why, did n't I tell you? Bless me, what was I dreaming of? Why Jennie's written to Minervy she don't like Elisha and wants to come back. Did you ever hear the like?"

Love raised herself a little from her recumbent position, her face blank with surprise. "She don't like Elisha?" she gasped; "she don't like the man of her choice that she could marry and cherish and make happy — and she only married a few days at that! Oh, Aunt Lucinda, how can that be?"

"Blessed if I know; I guess maybe she wanted to get married and took the first man that came along. I never knew it to work yet."

Love sank back, her eyes wide open with amazement. "And I who envied her, and who begrudged her happiness!"

she murmured as though frightened at the recollection.

Aunt Lucinda had gone to open the door for Seth. He came in eagerly. She saw the question on his lips and answered it before he could speak.

"She's been quiet all day," she whispered, "and I seen her smile often and often, though she don't say much. I reckon she's been watching for you this long time, though she knew you were n't coming until sundown. I fear me she grows weaker, Seth, — but maybe I'm over-anxious," — and Aunt Lucinda's lip trembled pitifully for a moment. But she recovered herself quickly.

"I've just told her about Jennie," she added, taking his hat and coat and hanging them on a peg.

Seth stamped the snow off of his heavy boots that reached nearly to his knees, and walked into the sitting-room as noiselessly as he could, and drawing the wooden stool close to Love's chair, he sat down.

She put her hand in his and looked at him, her face melting into an expression of supreme content.

"Aunt Lucinda's been telling me about Jennie," she said softly; "and just to think, Seth, that when I was alone I cried my heart out thinking how easily happiness had come to her and how miserable in comparison was my lot! And now I see that you and I have something the others have n't got at all, and that I would n't exchange for all that the world could give me. Oh, Seth, it seems now she never knew what it was to feel as if she and Elisha had like as though it was but one heart between them! That's the way I feel now — now that I see it all so clear. Never mind how my heart beats or how yours does, Seth, they both keep in tune to each other just like a beautiful chord o' music."

"That's true, Love," replied Seth, his eyes dark and earnest, and as he stroked her hand gently with his own rough one she noticed that it shook a little. "That's

true, little Love," he repeated, — "God knows what it means to me to hear you say those words."

There was a break in his voice in spite of his effort to control himself, for he could not but see that little by little her strength was leaving her, and in anguish he felt his impotence to stem that outflowing tide.

"It's as Parson Goodwin said," she continued — "it's the understanding and sympathy that counts and that lasts, — all the rest seems to be fleeting. Folks think they have a hold on it to keep it and they wake up of a sudden and find it gone. But what we've got, Seth, can't be lost. Oh, I'm so sorry now for Jennie — poor girl!"

"Jennie can't feel as you do, Love, — her heart's not stanch enough, and she can't see things you see," said Seth quietly. "All you say would be as a closed book to her, I'm thinking."

There was silence for a few moments, during which Love seemed to be deep in

thought, and Seth sat gazing at her sweet face as though to impress every line of it upon his memory. A stunned feeling held him. He thought of so much he longed to say and he found himself unable to put it into words. He feared the sound of his voice lest it betray his anxiety.

Presently Love looked at him and smiled. "To-night," she said, "you'll ring the old year out, Seth. The sky is clear and the moonlight will make the night beautiful! — I reckon the tone o' the bell will be like silver as it floats across the intervale."

As Love spoke of the bell a change came over Seth. The distressing tension that rendered him unable to express himself seemed to loosen — his very attitude lost its constraint and the blood mounted to his face which had been very pale.

" 'T is a solemn thing, Love, to ring the old year out," he said; "and there's so much that goes out with it, — sinful acts and holy acts, — sorrow and joy, —

weeping and laughter, — the bell must ring them all out with the passing o' the year so's to leave it all clear for what must be rung in with the coming o' the new."

"You'll ring our love in, Seth!"

"Aye, that I truly will, Love," he replied with emotion. "I'll ring it into your heart and mine — into your soul and mine — till the sound will echo in among the hills across the intervale and never cease. Long after we've gone it will still keep on, and I reckon folks that understand'll sense it somehow!"

Love's smile as she looked at him was like a ray of sunlight that flashed over her face for one brilliant moment.

"Like as not there'll always be some who'll understand," she said, continuing his thought; "and even after you have joined me, Seth, I'm thinking that the bell of its own accord will speak of us, though 't will be other hands that ring it. I like to think 't will be so."

The winter twilight had settled over the

village, and the evening star hung like a lamp in the western sky. The distant mountains and the intervale were wrapt in soft purple shadows. They could see it all from the back window of the little sitting-room.

With clasped hands interlocked they sat and watched it — happy in each other and confident in their great faith of the future. They did not notice Aunt Lucinda's small spare figure blocking the doorway.

"Seth," she called softly. He arose and went to her. "Seth, I fear me you've talked enough. I've waited supper, for I knew if you had aught to say 't were best to say it. I've beans and a loaf o' brown bread on the kitchen table and there's tea brewing on the stove, but Love must rest, — I thought we might all sup together, — but I don't know why, — I'm scared, — I can't tell what it is that makes me, — I feel as though 't were best we did n't try it."

"I must n't stay," answered Seth. "Night's coming on and Love is quiet. I've things to do before I go to the church. But let me go back once more to say good-night. 'T is the last night o' the old year, Aunt Lucinda."

"Aye — I know it," she replied, nodding her head gravely, — "I've been thinking of it. We know what's behind us and we can't see what's before."

Seth went back into the sitting-room, treading as softly as he could in his clumsy leather boots.

"I must n't stay to supper, Love, 'cause you must rest," he said, stooping over her chair, "but I shall be speaking to your heart when I ring the old year out and then again when I ring the new year in. Maybe you'll be sleeping sound, but you'll hear it in your dreams."

"I'm too happy to sleep," she answered, smiling, but her voice sounded a little uneven. "Hold me to you before you go, Seth!" she added suddenly, raising herself

with difficulty and holding her arms out to him, — "I feel kind o' strange! — seems as though I could n't let you go! — I guess maybe 't will be all right when Aunt Lucinda brings the light in."

The whiteness of her face in the deepening shadows startled him. A wave of apprehension swept him off his balance and he put his arms around her in agitation.

"You don't feel worse, Love, do you?" he gasped, bending her head back gently that he might scan her face more closely.

"Oh, no," she answered, trying to smile reassuringly. "I reckon I shan't feel worse Seth. I guess likely I'll just pass out when the time comes. 'T will be easy, — never fear, — and you'll know I'm safe, and full o' joy and life — same as Parson Goodwin said."

"But our hearts'll be united just the same, Love?" he entreated.

"Just the same," she answered, "and that'll be for always."

"For always," he repeated after her.

They clung together for a moment.

"Seth," called Aunt Lucinda again in a low voice.

He placed her tenderly back upon her pillows and kissed her very gently. Then he turned swiftly and left the room.

And Aunt Lucinda's woman's heart understood. She did not speak to him. She took his coat off the peg and helped him on with it, and put his hat into his hand. His face twitched painfully with emotion and without a word he opened the door and hurriedly passed out into the gathering night.

It was about half-past eleven that same night that Seth came up the road on his way to the church. The hours that had passed since he left Love had been spent in quieting down the tumult of apprehension that had beset him. More and more he realized how she had filled his life since that first day when years before the pathos

of her loneliness and infirmity and the loveliness of her sweet face had clutched at his heart-strings. As he became conscious of the coming separation he suddenly felt incapable of meeting the ordeal, and during his walk home he had prayed fervently for strength and for the serenity of an unswerving faith.

As the evening progressed the longed-for calm descended upon him, and when he started on his way to the church and looked up at the clear sky of the winter's night, the immensity of the vast, fathomless dome, glittering with the countless legions of twinkling stars, stirred within him an inner consciousness of eternal verities in contrast to the limiting sorrows of earth, and as he dwelt upon the mystery and wonder of the scene he gained control over the sudden feeling of chaos that had rent his soul.

The moon had risen and its rays were flooding the snow-fields with the brilliancy peculiar to a frosty night, and as

he walked along with his dog Bessie beside him their shadows stood out black and distinct upon the whiteness of earth's winter covering.

As he came near the village he saw a pung a little way ahead of him. From what he could see of the driver he gained the impression that it was Nathan Goodhue — and yet it was such an unlikely occurrence that he told himself he was mistaken.

"There's naught to bring Nathan out of his bed on a winter's night," he muttered to himself and he promptly dismissed the thought. In a few moments the driver whipped up his horse and the pung soon disappeared out of sight.

Seth's thoughts now centred themselves upon his bell as he trudged along, and he quickened his pace eager to get to it and to see that all was ready for what seemed to him an august ceremony fraught with infinite shadings of meaning.

He unlocked the door leading to the bel-

fry, and as he opened it and stepped across the threshold the thought of what Luther Skinner had told him flashed through his mind. So absorbed had he been in his thoughts of Love Babbitt that everything else had remained quiescent, but now the full import of Luther's strange tales came over him and he realized that the hour had come when he also as bell-ringer might be close upon some unusual experience. It was very cold in the church, and Seth's hands were so stiff that it was with difficulty he unlocked the door leading to the belfry. The rope hung where he could easily reach it, and through a window close at hand the moonlight streamed in making brilliant patches of silver on the floor. It was so light there that Seth did not need a lantern, and he left the outer door open in order to gain the added benefit of the reflection of the moonlight on the snow. Bessie, the dog, curled herself upon a bundle of straw that she discovered in a corner, and every now and then she whined

so that her master should know she was there.

When he saw that all was in readiness Seth stood by the rope and closed his eyes. The mystery of the hour was upon him. He looked back over the year that was passing out; he saw his own life, — and he saw the tragic pathos of Love Babbitt's, — the incidents that had followed each other in the life of the little village came before him, — and then his vision expanded and he became conscious of innumerable lives of whom he had no knowledge out beyond in that world where his feet had never trodden; crowded cities; solitary hamlets in the fastnesses of the mountains; fishing villages along the seacoasts; thousands and thousands of lives to whom the passing of the year meant something, — for whom the bells from countless belfries would be ringing.

A few minutes now and his bell would join the solemn requiem.

It was about ten minutes before twelve.

For a moment he stood with bowed head, — then he seized the rope and of a sudden a strong vibration throbbed out into the glittering night, — Seth was tolling the bell for the dying year.

Then the poet nature that was so much a part of him came uppermost. He varied his tolling in harmony with his thoughts, — now soft, — now louder, and then soft again, — he threw into this requiem the throb of all the joys and sorrows of human life. With beating heart he gave himself out to the supreme joy of self-expression through the tolling of the bell.

The moments passed. He had planned to stop three minutes before striking the midnight hour and after the twelve strokes had been given he would herald in the New Year.

He lowered his eyes. Was it his imagination or what was it? Surely he saw a luminous white mist, oblong in shape, by the door, and in amazement it seemed to him that he could distinguish two figures stand-

ing there as though listening to him toll! His hands dropped from the rope — he heard Bessie whine repeatedly. Rubbing his eyes he looked again. Did he see them or did n't he? He wanted to be sure he was not dreaming! An inner sense made him conscious beyond any doubt that there were two presences near him, and more than that he intuitively felt that they loved the sound of the bell! He told himself that they were friendly to him, — he felt strangely sure of it, — yet was it with an inner sight or with his mortal eyes that he saw them?

He glanced at an old dilapidated clock that hung upon the wall and awaited the fateful moment. It came.

His hands clasped the rope again, and with strong, vibrant tones slowly and solemnly he struck the hour.

Then grasping the rope with firmer hands, with head thrown back and eyes aglow, Seth rang in the New Year, — rang in his love for Love Babbitt, — rang in his

faith in God, — rang in the hopes of a pleading world! The ringing tones of the bell vibrated over the fields and forests, — over the sleeping village, — out over the intervale, — when suddenly, as though through the impulse of joy, he became conscious that the two listeners had joined him, — that their spirit hands were giving the rope an added power and rhythm, — that their joy was a part of his joy, — that their exaltation was akin to his! Gloriously pealed the bell! Joyous were its ringing tones! When crash! —

Stunned and almost blinded, he fell prostrate! Something like a black shape had leaped forward and had wrenched the rope violently, — the bell stopped with a loud, harsh clang, — he heard Bessie howl, — a heavy weight fell on him and crashed upon the floor! — He remembered nothing more.

Nathan Goodhue, watching outside, heard the sound, and simultaneously came a loud cry from Lucinda Tracy's cottage!

— Distraught with fear he rushed into the church and through the door to the belfry. In the moonlight he distinguished Seth's prostrate form.

On the floor close by lay part of the heavy rope, and the broken tongue of the bell! Shaking from head to foot with terror, but stanch in his loyalty to his friend who needed him, with panting breath Nathan knelt down on the floor and put his ear to Seth's heart. Then he felt of his head and of his shoulders. Sobbingly he whispered to him, "Seth, man, are you alive?" He was frightened at the sound of his own voice!

As he was putting his hands under Seth's arm-pits to drag him out, he felt him stir.

"Seth!" he whispered again. He saw Seth's eyes half open for an instant and in a broken whisper he heard him mutter: "Say naught of this to a living soul, Nathan Goodhue, or disaster will befall you!"

Nathan's teeth began to chatter and the

cold sweat poured from his forehead. He managed, however, to pull Seth out of the church, and when he had closed the door and locked it, he dragged him across the crest of the snow as far as the pung. With difficulty he managed to get him into it and was just starting to drive him to his home when something happened that fairly chilled the blood in his veins. What was that sound he heard, — so light, — so intangible, — like a puff of wind?

Surely it sounded like a faint laugh?

FINIS

Bells of the Past, whose long-forgotten music
Still fills the wide expanse,
Tingeing the sober twilight of the Present
With color of romance!

. . . . . .

Your voices break and falter in the darkness, —
Break, falter, and are still;
And veiled and mystic, like the Host descending,
The sun sinks from the hill!

YEARS have passed, and it is spring in the Nashua Valley. The air is filled with the delicate perfume of lilacs and apple blossoms. Down in the intervale the cattle graze upon the lush green grass bordering the river. The old earth pulsates with the joy of Nature's unfolding!

The day wanes. Along the road leading to the hill two women walk slowly up the gradual incline. One of them stops repeatedly to get her breath, and her face is

flushed, — but on it is an expression of solicitude as she tries to keep up with the small spare figure walking a step or two ahead of her.

"Lucinda," she gasps, "my feet are 'most dead! Rest here a moment till I ease them!"

Aunt Lucinda turned quickly. "We're most there now," she said, "so we must keep a-going, so's to get there before sundown."

Minervy leaned up against the stone wall and fanned herself violently with her bonnet.

"It's real good of you, Minervy, to come this long way," exclaimed Aunt Lucinda as she looked at her old friend and saw her evident fatigue. "Maybe I had n't ought to have asked you to, but I felt, somehow, I wanted you should hear 'em with me. I had a feeling my dear girl would like we should hear 'em together same as we used to."

"Don't you worry a mite," replied

Minervy, — "soon as I get my breath we'll keep right along." And she mopped her face with one hand while she waved her bonnet as a fan with the other.

"Lucinda Tracy," she said suddenly, "you always speak of Love just as though she were alive! I declare sometimes it gives me a shock to hear you, — why, she died as much as five years ago!"

"Love did n't die," retorted Aunt Lucinda very gently; "she just passed on. Time was when I'd have thought same as you, Minervy, — but if you'd been with my dear girl as I was you'd know the likes of her don't die, — they just pass on. 'Aunt Lucinda,' she used to say, 'the Scriptures tell us there *is* a natural body, — and that's this poor crippled shell you see here before you, — and there *is* a spiritual body, — and when I pass on that's what I shall gain, and I'll be full o' strength and full o' life'; — and when she'd talk that way seemed as though some o' that

life were hers already! — so I know she just passed on."

The two women leaned against the wall and were silent for a while.

In a few moments Minervy spoke again: "'T was night when she went as I remember."

"Yes," assented Aunt Lucinda, and her lip quivered as she spoke, — "'t was just about ten minutes after the New Year came in. I kind o' hate to think o' that night, 'cause there were things happened I did n't understand."

"You never told me about it," said Minervy, "and I've never asked, 'cause I knew some day you'd tell me when you felt you could. I recollect now 't was the night Seth Ware snapped the rope o' the bell while he was ringing, and the tongue fell out."

"Aye," assented Aunt Lucinda, "poor Seth! He acted like as though he'd been stunned for a long time. 'T was a strange occurrence,—and one I often ponder over."

She paused a moment and then continued: —

"I'd felt anxious for Love all the evening, but she was quiet, and it seemed as though the end were still some ways off, — and when she begged to leave the shade so's she could look out at the moonlight I saw no harm in it. She could sleep better in her chair and I put the blankets over her just where she was. I kind o' felt that she'd be listening for Seth's bell, — they'd talked considerable about it that very evening, — but while it was still early she dropped off into a light sleep. I was too anxious to go to bed, — I just got my shawl and settled myself in the armchair so's to be near her.

"Along near midnight the bell began to toll and Love opened her eyes. I thought they appeared bigger than usual, and there was a strange, far-seeing look in them, and I sat up in my chair, but kept as still as ever I could so's not to disturb her. We heard the midnight hour strike,

and then Seth rang in the New Year. I shall never forget the sound of it as long as I live. Why, Minervy, 't was as though the angels had hold o' that rope instead o' Seth Ware! I never heard the like of it! — and Love's face looked as though the light o' Heaven was shining on it, — her lips smiled and her eyes grew bigger and bigger, — when of a sudden the bell stopped, — and first thing I knew she was sitting up in her chair with her arm stretched out pointing at something and uttering a loud cry — Oh 't was a terrible cry! — 'Look! they're fleeing away!' she cried and then fell back. When I tried to raise her I found she'd gone!"

Minervy listened to the tale with bated breath. "Folks that are passing out often see things," she remarked thoughtfully. "Maybe it had nothing to do with the stopping o' the bell —"

As she was tying on her bonnet preparatory to resuming their walk she added: —

"Lots o' things happened just about that time. Don't you remember they found poor Hannah Turner'd drowned herself in the lake? 'T was strange how she got there, seeing as 't was said when she left Luther she went up Vermont way."

"Her body was found early New Year's morning," remarked Aunt Lucinda, "and they say she had n't been long in the water. — Now, Minervy," she added, "we must get up the hill quick, — the sun'll pretty soon be near touching the rim o' Wachusett Mountain."

It was impossible for Minervy to be quick. Her weight now prevented any attempt at unusual activity on her part. But she labored on with determination, stopping every now and then to mop her face.

"I recollect Seth spent considerable time trying to mend the bell," said Aunt Lucinda as they went along. "He tried all kind o' ways and folks said it could n't

be done. But he would n't give up for any one, and finally he managed to weld the tongue of it onto the ring that holds it in, and you'd never know but what it was as good as new. Nathan Goodhue says to look at it no one'd ever know of the breaking."

"Do you see Seth nowadays as you used to?" asked Minervy just as they approached the bend of the road which would lead them to the spot they were seeking.

"Seth comes now and again," replied Aunt Lucinda, "and we sit near Love's chair and we talk about her, and truly I feel then Minervy as though she knew! But he's like one who's always waiting, somehow, — I can't seem to put the words right, — sometimes he looks to me as though he were in a dream — And come to think of it, it's I do the talking, — he just sits there with his hand on the arm of Love's chair and he don't say much."

Minervy slipped her Hand impulsively into Aunt Lucinda's

As Aunt Lucinda finished speaking they reached the point of the road overlooking the whole sweep of the intervale.

The two old friends stood speechless before the breadth and beauty of the scene. Below them lay the Nashua Valley stretching from north to south in its gay garb of springtime. The sun was nearly ready to sink behind the hills, and already the shadows were gathering over the long stretches of pine forests that follow the river to the north. Shading their eyes they could see the vanes on distant steeples catch the light from the descending sun.

The air was sweet with the fragrance of green meadows and budding trees. Somewhere near two thrushes were calling and answering.

Minervy slipped her hand impulsively into Aunt Lucinda's: "The Glory of God and his handiwork!" she murmured. "Oh, Lucinda, it don't hardly seem real, it's so beautiful!"

They waited in silence — absorbed in the scene before them.

Then the silence was broken by the clear, sweet tones of the evening bells. Lancaster's came first, — deep-toned and mellow. Then the far-away sound of the bells of Fitchburg and the bells of Leominster, of Lunenburg and Shirley, followed in succession. A moment's pause —

Aunt Lucinda pressed Minervy's hand with emotion —

"Listen," she whispered —

Then came the answer — Out from the belfry of Still River rang the crystal tone of Seth's bell. It floated across the valley, — then again, — and yet again — calling — answering — and back and forth — back and forth pealed the chain of evening bells.

"He's pouring his heart out to Love," whispered Aunt Lucinda, her breath coming in sobs — "And, oh, my dear girl's listening — she said she would!"

They stood as if rooted to the spot.

FINIS

"It's like Heaven!" said Minervy brokenly, the tears streaming from her eyes.

The twilight was deepening when at last they turned to go.

"*Far, far away, like bells at evening pealing.*"

THE END

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